

THE ANALYSIS OF THE POLICY CYCLE AS A STRATEGY FOR SOCIAL WORK

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ABSTRACT

This article aims to present an analysis of the social policy process, with special relevance to the model of analysis of the policy cycle in phases or moments, as a strategy for Social Work. We start from the perspective of Michael Lipsky (1976, 2010) who considers the social worker as an implementing agent of public policy, as an active agent with influence on policy, as a real "policy maker". Thus, the article presents the three phases of the cycle - formulation, implementation and evaluation - in order to expose a general framework that can be operationalised and used as a tool to analyse the policies that these professionals implement.

Facing the need to analyse politics contributes to the politicisation of intervention, through the mobilisation of power in the struggle of forces which characterise the social field. If this challenge is not taken up, the social work profession can be seen as merely executive, abdicating its propositional function and its active role in the formulation, implementation, and evaluation of social policies.

Keywords: Analysis of public policies, Policy maker, Social work

INTRODUCTION

The term politics presents a diversity of meanings. This breadth of the concept led Easton and Jenkins to define politics as a set of actions, a web of interrelated decisions. Some authors, such as Hecllo, Ham and Hill and Dye, consider that in addition to action inaction (non-action) is an integral part of politics.

Like the concept of politics, the term public policy presents considerable conceptual diversity. Thus, we find wide-ranging definitions such as that of Dye (2013)[1] who considers public policy to be everything that the government decides to do or not to do up to more specific definitions that consider public policy to be government action in a particular sector or geographical area (see for example the conceptions of Meny & Thoenig, 1992[2]).

It is considered that the simplicity of the concept is illusory since, in addition to action (concrete measures, decisions), inaction can be considered an integral part of the concept, when it is deliberately decided not to produce any policy. It is

also made more complex by the understanding of public policy as the result of negotiations (and conflicts) between various actors - individual or collective, public or private - in which each one wants to safeguard its interests.

THE ANALYSIS OF PUBLIC POLICIES AS A PROCESS

Authors such as Wildavsky, Lindblom, Hogwood and Lindblom and Woodhouse were essential to the creation of analytical models of public policy, namely to the perception of policy as a dynamic process that, to be analysed, must integrate the set of phases or moments, thus overcoming the proposals in vogue that focused on the moment of formulation. In analytical terms, this perspective makes it possible to order the complex process of public policy, examine the specificity and complexity of each of the phases and understand which actors and factors are present and the influence they develop. On the contrary, the main limitations of this perspective arise when the analyst omits the complexity of the process, considering it as a sum of unconnected phases, and when they conceive public policy as problem solving, devaluing the struggles of interests that may be present throughout the process.

There are several contributions to the division by phases of the public policy process. Of the different contributions, this paper considers the model that integrates three moments: formulation, which includes the formation of the political agenda and decision-making, implementation and, finally, evaluation.

THE BIRTH OF PUBLIC POLICY: THE IMPLEMENTATION PHASE

The first phase refers to the formulation of the policy, the moment in which it is established what the issue to be addressed by the policy is and how this issue will be addressed. It is considered that this moment is subdivided into two: insertion of the problem in the political agenda and decision-making with the legitimisation of the policy.

The insertion of the problem in the political agenda begins with the introduction of a certain need or demand in the list of priorities of the public power, that is, in the political agenda. The introduction in the agenda occurs when the issue gains a broad public knowledge that demands an action within the competence (completely or partially) of the government, that is, when the issue is attributed the status of a public problem, grounding and legitimating the public intervention. For Elder and Cobb (1996)[3], the complexity of this movement of transforming an issue into a public problem is due, on the one hand, to the fact that governments have a limited attention span and, therefore, there are always more issues to attend to than time to consider them and, on the other hand, to the nature of public policy problems, considered as constructions and definitions and not as "a priori data". In this respect Kingdon (2013)[4] considers that the process that facilitates the transformation of an issue into a public problem integrates three

factors that may be cumulative, namely, the evolution of a given indicator (e.g. poverty rate, unemployment rate), the emergence of an unexpected event that leads to an urgent need for intervention (e.g. a natural disaster) and, finally, the emergence of a response to a previous public initiative. To these factors Peters (2005)[5] adds the need for the issue not to be a mere question, i.e., it must enable an intervention, be quantifiable and represent varied interests.

There are several models that explain the construction of the political agenda, namely: i) the rational or positivist perspective; ii) the pluralistic perspective; iii) the perspective of public opinion. Not all issues will be object of governmental action and, therefore, not all are transformable into policy, since there is no "space" on the political agenda for all issues of possible public interest. In this sense, agenda setting is one of the politically critical points in the policy-making process, since it involves different actors with a variable distribution of power who struggle to determine the agenda items and the selection of the most appropriate definition of the problem. According to Roth Deubel (2006)[6] this "struggle" movement can occur in two distinct ways: i) the problem or demand is introduced from the government into public opinion, through the use of the media or some pressure groups (unions, entrepreneurs, civil society, etc.). Here the cycle starts in the governmental sphere which "returns" it to the public space, so that it is legitimised, to return to the governmental field through its integration in the government's agenda. This dynamic occurs in a context of constant struggles and negotiations; ii) the problem or demand arises in the public space, "forcing" governments to assume its resolution or minimisation and, consequently, coercing the government to incorporate the matter into its agenda.

Regardless of whether the issue is put on the agenda by the government or from the public space, there are several actors that integrate this process and seek to impose (or convince about) their ideas and interests. These actors may be governmental - actors that integrate the State's institutional structure and, therefore, possess public power (members of parliament, some administrative positions, governments, courts, etc.) - and non-governmental - actors that do not integrate the State's political and administrative structure (pressure groups, academics, the media, political parties, third sector organisations, corporations, etc.).

After the problem has entered the political agenda, it undergoes a process of institutionalisation, whereby the problem is (re)defined so as to be framed within the political and administrative apparatus of the public system, to become 'solvable' through a policy and to respond to the various 'views' on the problem. This is a "translation" of the problem that allows producing the conditions to create a policy that responds to it, minimises it or prevents it. When the problem has been "translated", the need arises to select the alternative considered most suitable, which will allow decision making and the definition of objectives, resources, legal framework, etc. This selection occurs in a decision-making process that may or may not be democratic, and there is a high risk of losing its

participatory character when decisions are taken based on a normative and hermetic vision, making this phase little permeable to participation.

Note that there is a diverse set of models that seek to explain decision making: i) the model of bounded rationality, based on Simon's proposal; ii) the incremental model, of marginal adjustments or disjointed incrementalism strategy, presented by Lindblom; iii) the model of organized anarchy or in Olson's words, the bin model; iv) the public choice model. For Roth Deubel (2002) there are three models of decision-making: i) the first explains the process by focusing on the role of the State; ii) the second focuses the decision-making process on society and; iii) finally, the model that incorporates a mixed vision.

MAKING PUBLIC POLICY A REALITY: THE IMPLEMENTATION PHASE

The moment of policy implementation can be translated, in general, as the actualisation of the policy after its formulation. It is a phase of transforming policy intentions and decisions into actions and programmes, which involves planning and organising the administrative apparatus (existing or created for the purpose) and the financial, material, human and technological resources necessary for the execution of public policy. It is a procedure that enables implementation to transform a mere statement (legislation, plan or government programme) into effective action, a likely effect, a reality.

In general, we can group the different models of analysis of the implementation of public policies into top-down and bottom-up approaches.

The top-down approach studies implementation by focusing on high-level bureaucrats at the moment of decision-making. It is considered that the responsibility for implementing policy rests almost entirely on the actions of high-level bureaucrats who lead those at a lower level, who enjoy a small degree of discretion. It is assumed that the implementation of the policy must occur in accordance with the decision taken and execute exactly the technical, organisational and operational indications imposed in the policy design. In other words, this perspective assumes that implementation should be developed in accordance with the decisions made by the government and that there is a direct casual relationship between policy definition (input) and implementation (output). Here, when there is a policy failure, the causes are always attributed to its implementation process, which was unable to put the policy design into practice, whether because of the actors and powers that participate in implementation, the inefficiency or incompetence of the instances that execute the policy or another problem inherent to this phase. It thus proposes the creation of an apparatus, which may be visible or subtle, of control (regulations, incentives, sanctions, trusted actors, etc.) constituted and led by a governing body, with the aim of ensuring accuracy and concordance between implementation and the previously established policy design. A successful situation is considered to exist when there

is exact compliance with the legislation and programme inherent to the policy. In this approach we find some authors such as Pressman and Wildavsky (1973), Van Meter and Van Horn (2007) and Sabatier and Mazmanian (2007).

In the bottom-up approach, the analysis of implementation focuses on the decision networks that are formed at the moment and at the concrete level of implementation, and not only on the structures pre-established by the policy formulators. Some of the authors who defend this perspective are: Lipsky (1976, 2010), Bardach (1977), Rein and Rabinovitz (2007) and Elmore (2007). The bottom-up perspective originally emerged in Lipsky's studies, which sought to counter the prevailing intellectual tradition in which the determining factor in the process of formulating public policy was limited to the moment of decision-making. This author's studies provided evidence of the importance that teachers, social workers, doctors, police officers, etc. had in the development of public policy. Lipsky (1976, 2010)[7][8] called these workers "street level bureaucrats" and considered that in the development of their work, in the interrelationship that they established with citizens, they had great room for manoeuvre in decision-making and in the performance of their functions. For the author these professionals are the real "policy makers" in their respective areas of work, despite the various difficulties they face, namely the constant requests to adapt to the changes in working conditions and demands on their functions and tasks, the overload of tasks in services characterised by diversified, broad, constant and urgent demand, the absence of rigorous and operative indications about goals and priorities, the absence of recognition or incentives of status or remuneration and the lack of sufficient material and organisational resources for the effective performance of their functions. This situation produces in these workers a need to act with reserve in the provision of services and to devise routine schemes of action to manage the flow of demand and the pressures to which they are exposed. Lipsky's model thus focuses on the analysis of the involvement of actors at the level of the hierarchical chain responsible for implementing the policy. These actors develop actions designed as a response to difficulties and problems unresolved at the time of formulation or as options among the various alternatives for overcoming deficits or omissions in the policy design. The results of these actions and the interactions built up between the actors constitute the raw material for understanding the process of public policy implementation.

The importance of the analysis of the implementation process is also presented by Rein and Rabinovitz (2007)[9]. For them, implementation focuses on the actors that implement it, who in the course of this process face imperatives (legal imperative, which imposes that the actors comply with the legislative requirements inherent to the public policy to be implemented; rational-bureaucratic imperative, which guides the development of the policy within an organisational structure; consensual imperative, which allows for the existence of a diverse set of actors with divergent interests within the implementation process) that may be conflicting among themselves and that allow the implementer to highlight one over the other, which induces changes in the way the policy is

executed. These authors consider that it is at this stage that the degree of congruence between legislation and bureaucratic interpretation is established. Note that this "concretisation" of the policy is not only an interpretation of the law, since the implementers, when faced with omissions or doubts regarding the design of the law, take decisions that may alter the original legislative intention of the policy.

APPRAISAL AND ASSESSMENT OF PUBLIC POLICY: THE EVALUATION PHASE

There is a great diversity of evaluation concepts, which may be due to the changes that the concept has undergone due to the influence of various areas of knowledge and the need to study various fields of the same policy. For Cohen and Franco (1999)[10], evaluation is conceived as a process intrinsic to the policy planning and implementation process and its function is both the rationalisation of the resources involved in the development of the policy based on efficiency and effectiveness criteria, and the improvement of the actions developed during the execution of the policy.

There are several evaluation models that appear in the literature on the subject. Figueiredo and Figueiredo (1986)[11] classify evaluation according to the objectives to be achieved (process evaluation, impact evaluation, comprehensive evaluation); according to the results (effectiveness, efficacy and efficiency) and; according to the time criterion (retrospective evaluation, prospective evaluation, formative evaluation, integrative evaluation).

CONCLUSION

Here the social worker was seen as a policy implementer, in the perspective presented by Lipsky (1976, 2010), in which these professionals are considered as "street level bureaucrats" who in the development of their work, in the inter-relationship they establish with the citizens, have room for manoeuvre for decision making and for the performance of their functions. For the author, these professionals are the real "policy makers" in their respective areas of work, despite the various difficulties they face. Therefore, it is essential that these professionals understand the whole process of the policy they are about to implement. They should see public policy as a course of actions and inactions, which take place within a complex, dynamic and changing context, comprising a diversified set of actors, with distinct interests and objectives, who try to influence the decisions to be taken. Thus, it will be able to take into account in its analysis the complexity of the process and the contradictions inherent in the struggle of interests of differentiated actors who are part of the process.

Regarding the analysis models presented, we consider that the policy process divided into phases or cycles may constitute an essential tool for social workers. Briefly, this model may include three phases: policy formulation, which is

subdivided into the creation of the public agenda and decision-making, policy implementation and evaluation.

When implementing a policy, the social worker must be familiar with the policy formulation process, which involves transforming an issue into a problem of public interest and entering the political agenda. Not all problems receive public and government attention, so the first action of the process is to turn a certain issue into a problem with public and political interest, and it is necessary to understand why a certain problem, in a specific context, was considered as "deserving" such attention. The introduction of the issue in the discussion for its translation into a public problem may arise from the government or from the "public space" that "obliges" the government to consider it, and it is therefore necessary for the social worker to understand this process. From the moment the problem or issue reaches the political agenda and there is a decision to create a policy to respond to it, a process of institutionalisation of the problem occurs, which allows it to be (re)defined. This redefinition occurs to safeguard the interests of the actors involved and to adjust them to the principles and ideologies of the government and the operating logics of the political-administrative apparatus. The social worker must understand how the problem was "translated" in order to understand which perspective of the problem the policy will respond to and what was neglected about the problem.

The moment of policy implementation can be conceived as policy realisation, i.e. the transformation of policy intentions and decisions into actions and programmes. At this stage, the policy is implemented on the basis of the legal provisions created, the administrative apparatus existing or designed for this purpose, the resources made available, etc. The bottom-up model is considered to be the most adequate tool for the social worker to face this phase of the process. It is based on the idea that it is not possible to have absolute control over the entire policy-making process, which conditions the moment of implementation. Thus, implementation is seen as the product of a process that interacts with the context, the organisations and the actors present in implementation. It is also based on the idea that many decisions are taken during implementation, when conflicts, doubts and clarifications arise that could not have been foreseen at the time of policy formulation. The social worker is a professional who assumes a pivotal role in implementation, as he/she enables the transformation of the policy into real actions, decides on how to use resources, defines the objectives he/she considers to exist in the policy, resolves issues and problems not foreseen in the policy formulation, etc. This role makes this professional responsible, who must understand the importance it assumes and how its implementation can affect (and even change) the policy and therefore the population that benefits from it. Vigilant implementation and an awareness of the consequences of actions in the policy are fundamental for the social worker to materialize, through the policy, the principles of social justice and equity, dignity, non-discrimination, empowerment and advocacy of the population.

The last phase of the policy cycle is the evaluation, widely discussed in the literature, which presents various models depending on what is evaluated and the objectives to be achieved. Although evaluation emerges as the last phase of the cycle, it is often a tool to assist decision making at various moments, and in which the social worker should participate, so as to contribute to redefining the policy and creating new responses to problems.

It is stressed that no single definition of policy analysis and no single theory or model can capture or explain the complexity inherent to the policy analysis process. Despite this difficulty the policy cycle model with delimited stages emerged, for the reasons given, as the most suitable as a methodology of policy analysis for social workers. This analysis of the policy cycle removes the possibility of considering policy as "an essentially technical 'démarche', as a kind of political action without soul, without innocence, but also without guilt" (Stoer, Cortesão & Correia, 2001, p. 45)[12]. This is because they prevent the "decision processes, linked more or less to implementation, from being consigned to a non-place of political geography" (p. 20).

Social Work assumes an essential role in mobilising power in the struggle of forces which characterise the social field, to combat inequality and defend rights and social justice. Thus, it is essential for this professional to consider the analysis of the policy cycle as an action which forms part of his/her professional practice, so as not to neglect the "political attitude" (Faleiros, 2002, p. 86)[13] in the profession and, consequently, its emancipatory potential. For Faleiros this perspective, besides strengthening citizenship, enables a "link between the political dimension and the service dimension, not reducing Social Work either to psychological relationships or to bureaucratic relationships for access to certain benefits" (1999, p. 169)[14]. If it does not face this challenge, the profession may be assumed as merely executive, abdicating its propositional function and its active role in the formulation of social policies (Marques, 2016)[15].

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