

PUBLIC POLICY: MEANING AND SCOPE

Suphakarn Sophaporn
Udon Thani Education Center, Suan Sunandha Rajabhat University
E-mail: suphakarn.so@ssru.ac.th

Abstract

This article aims to briefly explore the meaning and scope of public policy that is generally accepted in the international context. Then, it will give examples of the definition and scope of the term in the Thai context, and discuss and make some observations on the path of public policy as a framework or guideline for both education and the creation of a good society. Public policy in the Thai context still revolves around the government sector, as seen from the definitions that have been reflected throughout history. However, there are examples of approaches to adapting definitions from the West to fit the Thai context. In terms of the scope of public policy, if we start from the understanding that public policy is interdisciplinary, it will open the door to view public policy from other perspectives and be open to the diversity of public policy, both as a framework for study, analytical framework, and leading society to a good society that everyone can access or be friendly to everyone.

Keywords: Public Policy, Meaning, Scope

Introduction

In the international context, public policy reflects the diversity to the point of being interdisciplinary under the so-called “policy science”. In the Thai context, public policy is understood as a part of the study of public administration. This can be seen from the National Higher Education Qualification Standards (M.Kor.1) (Ministry of Education, 2015) that states what is public policy in the curriculum. It is placed on the same level as knowledge of organization and management, human resource management, and finance and budget. At the same time, when considering the academic works of scholars in the field of public administration, Nisachon Prommarin (2009) pointed out that there were 145 writings on the topic of public policy out of a total of 1,501 writings on public administration produced from 1955-1979, second only to writings on organization and management, personnel management, and local government administration. Similarly, Suphakarn Sophaporn (2019) pointed out that the most articles in the public policy category were produced by public administration scholars in the Northeast between 2004-2017, totaling 184 articles, compared to the organizational theory and behavior category (113 articles), human resource management category (25 articles), and finance and budget category (24 articles) out of a total of 346 articles. Or in the work of Supraneet Thammaphithak and Ausanakorn Tavarom (2022), who pointed out that in master's and doctoral degree research between 2007-2021, public policy was studied the most by students in the Doctor of Philosophy (Public Administration) and Master of Public Administration programs, ahead of programs such as Doctor of Education and Doctor of Political Science at the doctoral level. As it is leading the curriculum such as Master of Economics and Master of Political Science at the master's level, it can be said that this may be part of the cause of the stagnation and stagnation of the development of public policy in Thai society, as Patcharee Siroros and Theerapat Ungsuchaval (2015) pointed out. Therefore, this article aims to briefly explore the meaning and scope of public policy that are generally accepted in the international context. Then, it will give an example of the definition and scope

of the term in the Thai context, and discuss and make some observations on the path of public policy as a framework or guideline for both studying and creating a good society.

Research Objectives

To study the meaning and scope of public policies that are generally accepted in the international context and the Thai context.

Research Methodology

This article uses a qualitative research approach in the form of documentary research by analyzing the content to synthesize the meaning and scope of public policies that are generally accepted in the international context and the Thai context.

Research Results

Meaning of Public Policy

Public policy is generally defined as: Public policy is whatever governments choose to do or not to do. Governments do many things. They regulate conflict within society, they organize society to carry on conflict with other societies, they distribute a great variety of symbolic rewards and material services to members of the society, and they extract money from society, most often in the form of taxes. Thus, public policies may regulate behavior, organize bureaucracies, distribute benefits, or extract taxes-or all of these things at once. (Dye, 2015). The above definitions make trying to understand public policy have both broad and deep dimensions. That is, policy is not only what the government does, but also includes what the government does not do as a decision (a decision to choose not to act). For example, many policies on morality and ethics have been neglected by the government, such as having sex during school age, abortion, or buying and selling government positions (Piyapong Boossabong, 2018).

In addition, Rod Rhodes (2006 cited in Piyapong Boossabong and Theerapat Ungsuchaval, editors, 2020) has given a global perspective and in fact, policy studies are not limited to public administration as a sub-discipline of political science, but also broaden the scope to cover other disciplines. His new definition, which has been widely accepted, is the activities of both the government and the actions of groups and individuals that act in the name of the state (actions of groups and individuals that act in the name of the state) or who have influence as if they were public-sector actors. This definition helps to expand the world of public policy beyond the world of the government. In other words, public policy is not in the hands of the government alone. The private sector, the education sector, civil society, and even “active citizens” can also create or co-design public policy (policy design), both by being a partner in driving the government, which is called being part of a policy network or community, and by creating an impact on the public. It may not be based on the government sector at all (Piyapong Boossabong and Theerapat Ungsuchaval, editors, 2020).

Adjusting the perspective to consider the meaning of public policy in the Thai context, which appeared in the writing of Malai Huwanan (1960) titled “Objectives, Policies and Plans”, which was the first work on public policy in Thai society. It mentioned policies in a way that is related to the principles of administration as a guideline for determining methods, processes, planning and project determination to achieve objectives. However, Nisachon Prommarin (2009) noted that the content of Malai Huwanan’s (1960) writing covers the definition of the relationship between objectives, policies and plans, as well as classifying the problems in determining objectives, policies and plans, which can be caused by what. Therefore, it is still far from “public policy science”. However, after many years, there has been interest in studying

public policy in the Thai context. For example, the writing of Tinnaphan Nakata (1973) in 1973 provided four policy science contents: policy development, policy determination process, the relationship between academics and government policies, and guidelines for studying and analyzing government policies. He cited the definitions of scholars such as David Easton, Morton Kroll, Lasswell and Kaplan, Ira Shakansky, and Thomas R. Dye as a framework for his definition of public policy. That is, Tinnaphan Nakata (1973) saw that public policy consisted of two important parts: the government's guidelines for action and the important programs that the government must organize by setting goals and methods to achieve them, including institutions and processes that are involved in the formulation of government policy and make government policy have a legitimate nature.

From the research on the meaning of the word public policy from both research and academic articles, including various published documents, whether it is teaching materials, teaching documents, books or textbooks on public policy by Thai academics up until the year this article is being written, that is, 2024 or after 64 years if counting from 1960 or 51 years if counting from 1973, it can be concluded that the meaning of the word public policy has mostly not gone ahead and after the definitions of Thai academics in the early period. There will be references from both Thai academics and academics that Tinnaphan Nakata (1973) once referred to in his work. Then he came to his own conclusion. In addition, even though it is not the current year or more than 10 years since the work of Nisachon Prommarin (2009), including the work of Patcharee Siroros and Theerapat Ungsuchaval (2015) was published. However, both works reflect the issue of stagnation and stalling of public policy development in the Thai context. Piyapong Boossabong and Pobsook Chamchong (2020) saw that public policy in the Thai context is often viewed as government policy. That is, public policy in the Thai context is equal to policies or things that the government does that have an impact on citizens (... what governments do and their effects on citizens) (Peter, 2015 cited in Piyapong Boossabong and Pobsook Chamchong, 2020). That is what Guy Peters (2015) said that public policy is locked in the hands of the "state" only. Coupled with the history and development of Thai public policy that are monopolized by public administration (as seen from academic writings on public policy previously shown), the definition of this term still revolves around the government sector and that the government sector must be the hero in any action that affects the public, or that only the government sector must be responsible for public matters, as well as the view that only the government sector has the legitimacy to talk about public policy.

Scope of Public Policy

Since the definition of public policy is unlikely to mean only government policy as previously understood, there is a question about the scope of public policy and how far it covers. This article will start from the fact that public policy is interdisciplinary. Therefore, here we will consider public policy from 3 dimensions: the dimension of government decision-making, the dimension of issues studied, and the dimension of fields in which public policy is involved.

The dimension of government decision-making

This dimension considers the scope of public policy, starting from the definition by Thomas R. Dye (2015), that is, what the government decides to do and not to do, which is possible for public policy to cover these things (Hogwood and Gunn, 1984, cited in Piyapong Boossabong, 2009).

- 1) General purpose, such as maintaining economic stability, solving poverty problems, reducing crime, providing education and healthcare to the people, maintaining security, and alleviating suffering and promoting happiness for the people, etc.
- 2) Process, such as the court's trial process, the process of public service provision by government agencies, and the process of suppressing terrorists by the police, etc.
- 3) Decision of government, such as trade liberalization, tax exemption for certain types of businesses (tax expenditure), and the announcement of national agendas, etc.
- 4) Legitimate and formal authorization, such as ministerial orders and ministerial announcements and Cabinet resolutions, etc.
- 5) Specific proposals, such as methods to resolve conflicts in the southern border provinces proposed by the Independent Committee for National Reconciliation, and methods to reduce the impact of free trade on garlic and shallots proposed by the Subcommittee on the Management of Production and Marketing of Garlic, Shallots, Onions and Potatoes, etc.
- 6) Programs, such as solving the drug problem, which consists of many projects and may be under any one strategic plan or strategy plan.
- 7) Fields of activities, such as campaigning to educate about the sufficiency economy, creating a database of best practices in the application of the principles of the sufficiency economy, and establishing a learning center for the sufficiency economy, etc. (It can be seen that these activities are all activities that aim to promote the sufficiency economy.)
- 8) Outputs/outcomes, such as receiving water jugs distributed by the government to villagers in arid areas and having water to use throughout the year after receiving the jugs.
- 9) Theories/models, such as the theory of sustainable development and the model that can reduce poverty (the model during the Thaksin government, etc.)

The dimensions of the issues studied

Here, we will give an example by referring to the work of Suphakarn Sophaporn (2019), which issues that can be studied using the public policy framework by applying the systemic framework of David Easton (1965 cited in Piyapong Boossabong, 2009) and the process framework of Thomas R. Dye (1981 cited in Piyapong Boossabong, 2009) as a conceptual framework will cover (1) the subcategory that describes the overall picture of public policy, (2) the environment subcategory that describes the situation, context, and various environments surrounding the input factors subcategory, process subcategory, output factors subcategory, and feedback data subcategory, (3) the input factors subcategory that describes problem identification, petitioning, and support, (4) the process subcategory that describes policy proposal formulation, policy legitimization, and political or administrative processes, (5) the output factors subcategory that describes the policy/law, policy implementation, and decision-making regarding policy, both in terms of action and non-action, and (6) the feedback data subcategory that describes policy evaluation, including feedback data. By paying attention to the local, regional, national and international levels. The issues that can be studied using the public policy framework include tourism issues, agriculture issues, special economic zone issues, renewable energy issues, community economy issues, waste management issues, disaster management issues, poverty and inequality issues, natural resources and the environment issues, public policy issues, social issues, health issues, food issues, transportation issues, education issues, industry issues, etc. (Suphakarn Sophaporn et al., 2022) For example, work from issues related to community economy, such as the work of Nattachai Aeknarajindawat (2022) on Product Processing Development “Red Tamarind Coffee for health”.

The dimensions of disciplines that public policy is involved in

Here, an example is given from the work of Piyapong Boossabong and Theerapat Ungsuchaval, editors (2020) on policy studies from various perspectives that use the framework of Wayne Parsons (2003, cited in Piyapong Boossabong and Theerapat Ungsuchaval, editors, 2020), which classifies public policy into 8 branches:

1) Welfare Economics, emphasizing the application of concepts and methods of welfare economics and development economics to enhance the rationality and efficiency of policy decision-making.

2) Public Choice, emphasizing the application of the framework for analyzing individual behavior in the market to understanding public policy, including collective actions of individuals to manage the commons or public goods. This has expanded to include the group studying public policy with behavioral economics, which focuses on providing information to motivate individuals to change their behavior without coercion.

3) Information Processing/Data Analytics focuses on analyzing quantitative data (including Big Data) to support policy decision-making (including the development of Decision Supported System: DSS) using statistical tools, time-series analysis, mapping, or machine learning/AI, which has grown in the fields of mass communication, geography, and urban planning and design.

4) Social Structure focuses on studying policy through understanding social structure (structure/actors/actors/individuals and interactions), such as with sociological theories, and places special importance on the connection between policy and society as a policy context. Which is the base for the study of "Governance" to grow in the field of policy studies, including the concepts of "Policy networks" and "Policy communities", which grew from the base of explaining "Complexity" and "Wicked issues", and is a stream that often helps to elevate the study of the original straight lines to have more dimensions.

5) Management Focuses on studying to apply management tools that are mainly developed in business administration to create and drive public policies (such as Balanced Scorecard (BSC), Total Quality Management (TQM), Knowledge Management, Strategic Planning and Management, Foresight/Scenario Planning, Innovation Management)

6) Political Process Focuses on understanding the policy process as a political process through the main lenses of looking at it in terms of steps (Statist approach), looking at it in terms of systems (System approach), looking at it in terms of institutions (Institutional approach), or even looking at it through the framework of public law (Pubic law). In the latter period, the view in terms of the policy cycle (Policy cycle) has been reduced to the view that sees policies in pieces. Or it is a step by step sequence from identifying the problem, setting the agenda, creating alternatives, analyzing alternatives, to implementation, monitoring and evaluation, and going back to review or identify new problems. It does not reflect the actual policy phenomena much because almost no policy moves in that manner. The main reason is the political conditions that are overlooked. If you open the latest textbooks, you will start to see that the explanation of the process/steps in the form of a policy cycle has almost disappeared. Or if anyone still writes textbooks in this style, they tend to be looked down upon in the circle (while Thai textbooks are mostly in this style).

7) Comparative Politics Focuses on studying comparative public policies with the influence of comparative political traditions. By linking with the study of policy transfer, whether it is the implementation of policies from one place to another (policy installation), policy cultivation by taking seeds from elsewhere (policy transplantation), taking policies from other places as models (policy emulation), combining policies from other places and existing ones (policy convergence), or even policy learning (through lessons drawing), which is related

to the diffusion of prominent policy models (policy diffusion) or the desire to have after seeing that other places have them (policy isomorphism).

8) Political Philosophy focuses on studying the principles, norms, or even ethics that set the framework for developing good policies through political philosophy, thoughts, or theories (Political Philosophy/Thoughts/Theories), including critical and interpretive approaches (influenced by anthropology). The existence of this line can almost be called the breaking down of the strongest wall between political science and policy studies under public administration. The policy study in this perspective is to understand the transformation or movement from political ideas to political actions (policy as the transformation of political ideas to political actions).

Conclusion

Public policy in the Thai context still revolves around the government sector, as seen from the definitions that have been reflected throughout history. However, the approach of using definitions from the West can be adapted to fit the Thai context, while also looking at the state of public policy in the global context, such as using a more comprehensive and inclusive definition of public policy. In the work of Piyapong Boossabong and Pobsook Chamchong (2020), they used the definition of Thomas R. Dye (1992) and expanded the impact on citizens to the public, including everyone besides the state who can create an impact as if they were part of the state sector, according to the definition of Rhodes (1996). In terms of the scope of public policy, starting from the understanding that public policy is interdisciplinary, it will open the door to view public policy from other perspectives, along with accepting the diversity of public policy, both as a framework for study, analytical framework, and leading society to a good society that everyone can access or be friendly to everyone.

Acknowledgement

The researcher would like to express sincere gratitude to Suan Sunandha Rajabhat University for its invaluable support throughout this research.

References

- Boossabong, P. (2009). Public policy formulation: Paradigms, approaches, models, frameworks, and techniques. Sema Tham.
- Boossabong, P. (2018). Decoding public policy and planning. CMU School of Public Policy and MSU College of Politics and Governance.
- Boossabong, P., & Chamchong, P. (2020). Inclusive policy design. CU Social Research Institute.
- Boossabong, P., & Ungsuchaval, T. (Eds.). (2020). Policy studies from different perspectives. CMU School of Public Policy and CU Social Research Institute.
- Dye, T. R. (2015). Understanding public policy (15th ed.). Prentice Hall.
- Huwanan, M. (1960). Objectives, policy, and plans. *Journal of Development Administration*, 1(3), 1–33.
- Ministry of Education. (2015). The standards for bachelor's degrees in public administration 2015. Ministry of Education.
- Nakata, T. (1973). Policy, development and academics. *Journal of Development Administration*, 13(1), 101–129.
- Nattachai, A. (2022). Product processing development “Red Tamarind Coffee for health.” *SSRU Journal of Public Administration*, 5(2), 156–173.
- Peters, G. (2015). *Advanced introduction to public policy*. Elgar.

- Prommarin, N. (2009). The evolution of public administration paradigms in Thailand during 1955–2008 A.D. [Master’s thesis, Chulalongkorn University].
- Siroros, P., & Ungsuchaval, T. (2015). Unpacking policy studies: The origin, being, and destination of public policy studies. In W. Luangprapat, T. Ungsuchaval, & P. Tantrajin (Eds.), *Unpacking public policy: Multiple perspectives in contemporary public policy studies* (pp. 26–79). Faculty of Political Science, Thammasat University.
- Sophaporn, S. (2019). Paradigms of public administration in Northeastern Thailand among dynamics of problems and challenges in the region [Master’s thesis, Mahasarakham University].
- Sophaporn, S., Aeknarajindawat, N., Amnartcharoen, T., & Sangchai, W. (2022). 14 years of public administration studies in the Northeast regarding public policy. *The Journal of Development Administration Research*, 12(1), 108–137.
- Thammapitak, S., & Thawarom, U. (2022). Assessment of the status of knowledge on public policy during 2007–2021. *Journal of Public Administration and Politics*, 11(2), 12–27.