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For a public policy road map

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India's global competitiveness is inextricably linked to its ability to formulate and implement sound public policies, the making of which is one of the most ignored aspects of governance.

The Global Competitiveness Report 2014-15 published by the World Economic Forum (WEF) has ranked India 71 in its Global Competitiveness Index (GCI). This report assesses the competitiveness of 144 global economies based on 12 points. These include institutions, infrastructure, health and education, labour market efficiency, technological readiness, innovation and business sophistication. India was ranked 60 in 2013-14. Now, it occupies the lowest position among the BRICS countries. Russia was ranked 64 in 2013-14, four ranks below India, but is 53 in 2014-15. China is 28. The GCI rankings for 2014-15, followed by , in brackets, the 2013-14 rankings, which were for 148 economies are: Brazil 57 (56); Russia 53 (64); Indian 71 (60); China 28 (29) and South Africa 56 (53).

India's global competitiveness is inextricably linked to its ability to formulate and implement sound and effective public policies. Public policymaking is one of the most ignored aspects of governance in India. In fact, we have mastered the art of adhocism for governance, with little or no effort to seek empirical analysis in formulating public policy. While all empirical analyses have their inherent limitations, they are indispensable in weighing different options from the point of view of policy effectiveness. Public policy is critical in every aspect of governance, not least for making laws, rules, regulations, executive orders and administrative directions, and for formulating policies of the government. The purpose of public policy is to not only provide answers to all questions, but also to do so by helping the government to ask the right questions in the first place.

Using empirical analysis

In recent times, public policy as a discipline has brought to bear many fields of inquiry with a view to addressing the central problems of governance. Public policy analysis requires a more rigorous approach in which many fields of inquiry, including, but not limited to sociology, political science, law, anthropology, ethics and history besides economics, remain relevant. This kind of analysis and approach to public policy is indispensable for good governance. An example of such a multidisciplinary approach to assessing public policy effectiveness is the recent *India Public Policy Report 2014*.

There are some pointers in a road map for public policy-based governance. Here are four points, the first being 'evaluating policy effectiveness through empirical analysis'. It is essential that empirical analysis forms the basis for determining policy effectiveness. For far too long, public policy formulation has been based on anecdotal evidence, perceptions of what might work and what would not, conventional wisdom of our political and bureaucratic hierarchies, and specious forms of populism. But, as we develop and become a more mature democracy in which reasonable people can disagree as to what is the best way to govern India, there is a need to develop a stronger and sounder empirical basis for policy formulation. Policy formulation should move beyond the whims and fancies of power holders or the good intentions of a few individuals. It should rest upon sound institutional basis in which there is both continuity and change over time. A potential advantage of policy formulation through empirical analysis is that it reduces the risk of dramatic changes in policy due to changes in government after elections.

One of the unfortunate aspects of governance in India is that whenever any new government comes to power, be it in a State or at the Centre, it spends considerable time undoing many things that the previous government had done. The strange thing in this approach to public policy formulation is that many a time, the same officers who were involved in policy formulation in previous regimes advocating these policies then end up working to justify why these policies are not good. The root of this problem can be traced to the fact that in the first place, these policies were not thought through properly and were not based upon sound empirical foundations to justify their formulation.

Issue of scrutiny

The second is 'rigorous legal and constitutional scrutiny before law and policy formulation'. The last few decades of governance in India have demonstrated the growing importance of courts and quasi-judicial institutions. Today, more than ever before, every law, policy, rule and regulation formulated by governments and regulatory bodies is being increasingly subject to rigorous legal and constitutional scrutiny. The typical government response has been that this is judicial activism which is hindering the process of executive decision-making and policy formulation. However, if the executive and the legislature accords more time, thought and reflection before passing laws or making policies, the risk of them being challenged in the courts and the courts declaring them to be in violation of the law or the Constitution, can be considerably reduced. Adhocism, vested interests, biases and prejudices, discrimination and arbitrariness in policy formulation and implementation have made laws and policies more vulnerable to judicial negation. It does not augur well for a mature democracy when every decision of the government ends up being challenged in a court of law. The effective functioning of democracies through constitutional governance presupposes a minimal degree of trust among institutions exercising their respective constitutional duties and responsibilities.

Building linkages

The third aspect is in 'building linkages among government agencies and academic institutions'. Public policy formulation has been an exclusive domain of government departments and agencies. Historically, anybody outside the government giving suggestions to people in government was not only frowned upon but also strongly resisted. Government agencies including ministries in the Central government and departments in the State government are woefully preoccupied with a range of day-to-day matters of governance. Their capacity and ability to think and reflect on sound public policymaking is minimal not because of any inherent limitations of competence, but due to a lack of time and attention, while dealing with the sheer magnitude of bureaucratic procedures of their own making. Under these circumstances, it can only help the government if it develops strong and substantive linkages with academic institutions, research centres and independent experts. But for these linkages to be effective and meaningful, they should be backed by significant changes in the internal governance structures of government bodies. The advisory role that is hitherto played by people outside the government should give way to a stronger and executive role so that those providing advice feel that their arguments and analysis will be taken seriously and not be set aside after the pretence of consultation leading to an empty and sham exercise in the quest for legitimacy. Public policy should enable people to "speak truth to power."

Establishing centres

The fourth is in 'building public policy schools and research centres'. If there is one specific area that is crying for reform, it is the need to establish several world-class public policy schools in India. Interdisciplinary studies relating to public policy, both as an academic programme as well as a research programme leading to cutting edge, empirical and pioneering research in various fields are absent in India. This void is particularly felt in the humanities and social sciences more than in sciences, medicine and engineering. Public policymaking in India, whether it is about building roads, bridges, airports, sea ports, or for that matter, launching rockets and creating nuclear power stations requires not only well-trained engineers and scientists, but also sociologists, anthropologists, lawyers and, most of all, public policy practitioners who can ensure a consultative dialogue among all stakeholders, including government representatives. The heart of a sound public policy programme lies in the amalgamation of qualitative and quantitative methods for training professionals in public policy; a study of economics and sociology, which is critical to the understanding of social and economic development; law, ethics and governance, which are relevant for examining the institutions that are responsible for public policymaking and to what extent transparency and accountability inform policymaking.

The future of governance in India is bound to become more complex leading to disputes and disagreements over different visions of growth and development. In responding to these challenges, the urgent need is for public policy-based analyses in which every stakeholder has a voice and where every voice adds dimension and meaning to the development discourse. The need for ensuring public policy effectiveness is essential to achieve good governance. Otherwise, this goal will remain elusive and our global competitiveness will further decline, as it has been the case for many years.

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