

**THE ROLE OF INTEREST GROUPS IN GOVERNMENT POLICY PROCESS IN NIGERIA**

**Edevie, Sonvie Prudence**

[sonvie.prudence@iithyenagoa.edu.ng](mailto:sonvie.prudence@iithyenagoa.edu.ng)

**Department of Public Administration  
International Institute of Tourism and Hospitality, Yenagoa,  
Bayelsa State, Nigeria.**

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**Abstract**

Public policy is the major outline of the programmes and projects of government and how they should be implemented to positively affect the welfare of the citizenry. Interest groups play a crucial role in enhancing the policy process for sustainable national development in Nigeria. Unfortunately, over twenty-eight years (1966-1979; 1983-1998) of military rule in Nigeria disjointed the approach in the policy-making process. This study, therefore, interrogates how the non-involvement of interest groups has affected national development in the country. The study adopted the group theory and applied the secondary data collection method. According to the research, it was discovered that the absence of interest groups' participation in the creation and execution of public policies has resulted in unstable policies that have hindered Nigeria's progress and development. The result of the study emphasized the need for an enabling environment where public policymaking should be participatory and recommended a value re-orientation for policymakers to interface with interest groups to enhance sustainable development in Nigeria.

**Keywords:** Democracy, enabling environment, interest groups, policy formulation and implementation, sustainable development.

**Introuction**

Public policy is a fundamental tool of governance this is because government policies and decisions are matters that pertain to the polity. Sequel to the fact that governance in contemporary times is a social contract between the government and the governed, it is appropriate to expect the former to fashion out all well-laid-out and time-tested course(s) of action that can positively affect citizens. Public policy is crucial in the development of any society as it outlines the programmes and projects of government. There is no gain in saying the fact that the social, economic, political, and cultural advancement of a people depends largely on the nature of public decisions taken by those saddled with such responsibilities. It involves the processes by which changes are effected for the overall well-being of the citizenry but this can be achieved, If interest groups are seen as crucial contributors to the policymaking process and drivers of national advancement. Development in Nigeria has become an elusive dream because, following from the experience of Nigeria, the adoption of a specific course of action or policy by the government is no guarantee that the policy will achieve the purpose(s) for which it was meant, nor is there any guarantee that the policy will be implemented at all. Every public policy has a target group. Implying, that every policy has a set of persons whose needs it is expected to pursue and realize. This group may range from a small community whom the government intends to provide a welfare programme for, or to the entire nation for whom the government is enacting an energy policy. In the period of military rule, the general population seldom had a say in the decision-making process as the military government believed it had all the solutions to the country's problems. The restoration of civilian governance in 1999 brought about optimism for curbing the ongoing deterioration in the social, economic, and political aspects of the nation. Nevertheless, there has been no

substantial improvement in the overall quality of life for the populace. The high rate of unemployment, power failure, housing crisis, poor health service delivery, and economic crisis are all clear indicators of the prevailing situation. The Fourth Republic faced numerous complex policy challenges, marked by difficulties and shortcomings between various interest groups and government actors, primarily concerning public infrastructure, healthcare, and education. According to Eribake (2010), the government's policies were perceived as unbalanced and had limited or negligible effects on the general population. This study examines the non-involvement of interest groups in the public policy formulation and implementation processes has led to unstable policies which, in turn, hampered development in Nigeria.

## **Conceptual and Theoretical Framework**

### **Public Policy**

The notion of public policy pertains to the actions taken by individuals in positions of authority to achieve government objectives or aims concerning societal issues. These policies are usually directed at problems in society, which for example among others, might be health, education, and environment-related. Onyeziri (2002) public policies are 'vital instruments of governance'. He also defines it as tools with which state elites, more conventionally referred to as policymakers, seek to mould or shape the lives of their people or society towards a desired end. A policy refers to a collection of choices made by a political entity or collective regarding the establishment of objectives and the means to achieve them, about a particular circumstance. According to Ezeani (2006), the proposed course of action refers to the plan that the government plans to execute about a specific problem or situation it is facing. Ikelegbe (2006) presents a more expansive viewpoint by suggesting that public policy encompasses the comprehensive range of actions and initiatives established by the government, along with the framework or blueprint created to steer behaviour and approaches in specific areas of concern. Policy planning is a crucial aspect, as the implementation of an incorrect approach will ultimately result in the inability to accomplish the intended goal. Even when a specific approach is embraced, it is crucial for policy actors to actively oversee the actions of implementation agencies to ensure they stay aligned with the objectives of the organization. In addition, according to Thomas Dye (1972), the actions and decisions made by the government are considered public policy. This implies that choosing not to act is also a form of action that can shape public policy. According to Roberts and Clark (1982), public policy is a sequence of governmental actions aimed at addressing issues that necessitate the distribution of resources to facilitate policy implementation.

Public policy serves as a roadmap for the government to pursue its envisioned goals and objectives. Nigeria has implemented a range of public policies in different sectors, including the National Policy on Education, National Population Policy, National Housing Policy, and Poverty Alleviation Policy, among numerous others.

### **Attributes of Public Policy**

As stated by Sambo (1999: 283), there are certain fundamental aspects that set public policy apart from private policies and other types of policy.

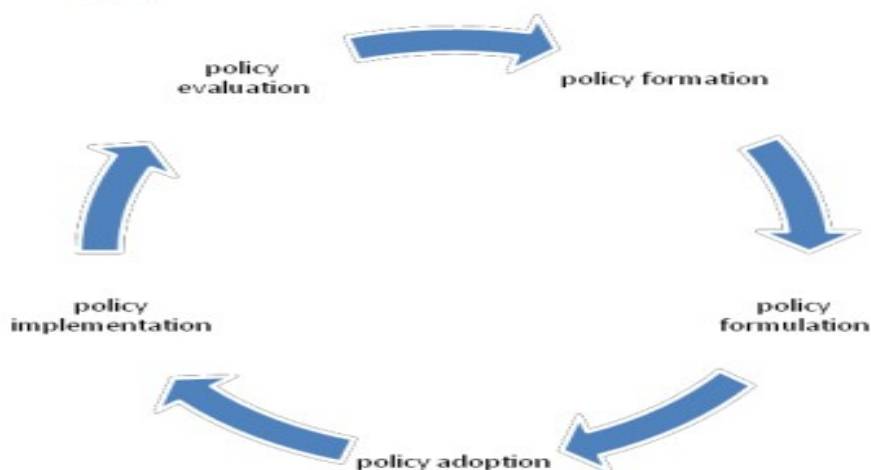
1. Public policy refers to a deliberate course of action or purposeful behavior, as opposed to being random or accidental in nature.
2. The courses or patterns of action undertaken by government officials are encompassed by public policy.
3. Public policy encompasses various explicit actions undertaken by the government to address a specific issue; it also encompasses the deliberate choice of government

officials to refrain from intervening or taking any action on a matter where governmental involvement is desired.

4. Public policy is established through legal means and holds authoritative status. This implies that public policy holds legal obligations. In certain regions of Nigeria, the monthly sanitation regulations hold significant legal weight and carry penalties for individuals who violate them.

### Policy Making Process

Fig 1: Public Policy Cycle or Process



Source: Adapted from Brady and Bullock, (1978: 8)

#### Policy Formation Stage

The process entails recognizing the issue at hand. Public issues encompass a significant number of individuals and have far-reaching impacts, including repercussions for those not directly implicated, such as the national minimum wage.

#### Policy Formulation Stage

This involves the development of appropriate and consensus-based proposed approaches for tackling societal problems. In Nigeria, the process of policy formulation typically involves the active participation of the president, their trusted advisors, and a diverse range of individuals from the executive branch. Additionally, appointed administrative officials, committees, commissions, and legislators play crucial roles in presenting bills for assessment by the national assembly. The following stages involve the procedure of policy formulation: Identifying the challenges and policy concerns related to establishing objectives and aims, developing options and strategies, selecting preferred options and strategies, making policy decisions, formulating implementation plans, and evaluating and restructuring policies.

#### Policy Adoption Stage

When a policy choice is determined, it necessitates an authoritative endorsement as part of the concept of public responsibility. Although decisions can be efficiently made at one level, they are frequently authorized and validated at a different level. Hence, certain tactical factors are focused on validating the procedure and garnering backing for a suggested plan of action, upholding previously obtained support, determining areas for potential concessions, assessing the optimal timing and location for assertive moves, and managing the dissemination of information.

### **Policy Implementation Stage**

This crucial stage of the policy-making procedure involves the responsibility of collecting utilizing available resources (including individuals), allocating resources effectively, and leveraging resources (operations) to accomplish policy goals. The primary implementers of public policy are the administrative agencies, although the judiciary and legislature also play a role in its implementation. The executive's decision can be overridden by the legislature with a two-thirds majority, while the Courts are responsible for interpreting statutes and administrative rules and regulations.

### **Policy Evaluation Stage**

This marks the final phase of the policy process. The process entails an effort to ascertain the effectiveness of a policy. Its purpose is to assess the significance, efficiency, and influence of policy and program initiatives based on their intended outcomes. It also focuses on the effectiveness of program implementation. Anderson, Brady, and Bullock (1978) classified evaluation into two distinct categories: Conducting a political assessment to evaluate the policy's viability in the political landscape; The process of systematic evaluation aims to impartially assess the effectiveness of policies and ascertain the extent to which objectives have been achieved. This type of assessment centres on the impact that a policy has on the specific issue it is aimed at addressing.

### **Interest Groups**

An interest group aims to exert its influence on government decisions, policies, and actions to support its diverse affiliations or the overall welfare of the public. Frequently, they raise awareness among the general population regarding governmental policies, leading to increased public understanding of issues originating from those in power. In addition, they advocate for policy requests on behalf of their members and the general public, which serve as contributions to the policy-making process. Considerable attention was generated by the topic of deregulation of petroleum products in Nigeria, resulting in a multitude of inputs and requests from various interest groups. These groups include labor unions, the media, private sectors/professional bodies, non-governmental organizations, and civil society organizations. Before devising a plan for the deregulation of the oil industry, the government sought input from the public. Some examples of interest groups include; the Nigeria Labour Congress (NLC), Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU), Nigerian Bar Association (NBA), Trade Union Congress (TUC), Nigerian Medical Association (NMA), National Association of Nigerian Students (NANS), Ijaw National Congress (INC), Arewa Consultative forum (ACF), among others.

According to Ehrman's Okeke (2014), pressure groups are characterized as voluntary organizations comprised of individuals. They form a coalition to advocate for a particular interest, driven by a strong urge to shape government policies and promote principles of good governance, ultimately aiming to achieve tangible outcomes. According to Okeke (2014), they are a collective entity that actively influences governmental decisions without any intention of acquiring official authority. He additionally expressed that these are organizations known as "protest groups" or "lobby groups" that consistently exert influence on the government from external sources. According to Clarke (Adamolekun, 2000), he mentions that these organizations are sometimes private, non-profit, and have a distinct legal identity, with the responsibility of achieving public welfare objectives. According to Okeke (2014), Baldo and Sibthorpe provided a detailed analysis indicating that these collectives encompass the civil society, which comprises numerous voluntary organizations that act as a bridge connecting individuals and the government. Interest groups are entities, whether lawful, structured, or unstructured, that actively strive to advocate for their unique interests within society by

persuading public officials. Their focus is directed towards persuading the legislative and executive branches of government, political organizations, and occasionally the general public's collective viewpoint.

### **Theoretical Review**

The study adopted the group theory propounded by A.F Bentley in his work “The Process of Government” (1908). Politics is the method through which societal values are officially distributed. This is accomplished through choices. The choices are generated through actions. Every individual activity is not distinct from any other, but collections of activities exhibit shared inclinations when it comes to decision-making. These collective endeavors are organizations. The conflicts among various factions or concerns shape the outcome of decision-making. Public policies in the present era are the result of collective efforts and consensus achieved through societal challenges. The proponents of group theory contend that the dynamics between various groups are the fundamental aspect of politics and a significant component of the governing procedure. Policy is the outcome of the dynamic interplay, rivalry, and conflict among various factions. The equilibrium or compromise reached in the group struggle is always a specific policy at any given time. The political system, consisting of institutions and policymakers, acts as a mediator for group interactions and implements policies that prioritize the interests of influential groups and their claims. To uphold their influence, organizations guarantee entry to the crucial areas of decision-making within governmental institutions, this includes legislative committees, the executive branch, administration, and even the judiciary. The effectiveness of each group is influenced by its leadership, organizational framework, accessible resources, and strategic placement.

The group theory is apt in policy considerations because in most societies especially the developed ones, various groups play a significant role in the process of policy formulation and implementation. Group theory asserts that the dynamics and conflicts within groups serve as the central aspects of political existence.

In a democratic system, interest groups play a significant role in shaping the policy-making process. This is crucial in ensuring policy sustenance, efficiency and effectiveness. Interest group focuses on these processes for the benefit of their members. To this extent, interest groups aid in drawing government closer to the people giving the policy makers significant information that would enhance the outcome of public policy.

### **Methodology**

The study employed the secondary source of data collection by appraising the works of scholars on public policy. This entails published and unpublished materials including text, journals, magazines, articles and the internet.

### **Interest Groups as Actors in the Policy-Making Process**

Interest groups as actors in the policy-making process lack direct constitutional or legal authority to formulate or execute public policies, but since public policies affect them directly the option available to them is to influence policies by putting constant pressure on the governmental actors. However, this indirect role should not be misunderstood as a weakness or disadvantage but rather that is precisely where their power is situated. In Nigeria, various interest groups adopt different strategies to achieve their objective of influencing government policies for their member’s interests. Some engage the government in negotiations in the hope of reaching a compromise. However, when peaceful negotiations fail they resort to embarking on a strike to increase the pressure on the government. Furthermore, they organize

peaceful public protests to attract public sympathy for their course. They include; NLC, TUC, NANS etc.

Most interest groups adopt lobbying as a strategy to achieve their objectives. Lobbying entails sending representations to government officials, particularly members of the legislative chambers, seeking to influence them to protect their interests. Moreover, interest groups that protect the interests of ethnic groups such as the Arewa consultative forum for the Hausa/Fulani struggle to maintain Hausa/Fulani dominance of the political leadership of the nation, others like Ohaneze for the Igbos and the Ijaw National Congress for the Ijaws and so on, campaign against marginalization. They struggle for equal opportunities in political appointments, contracts, electoral positions, etc. All these organizations are actors in their diverse ways in the process of making and implementing public policies.

### **Public Policy Making In Nigeria**

Public policy plays a crucial role in governing various sectors, both public and private, at all levels. In essence, public policy is focused on effectively tackling societal issues. The objectives of policy can differ greatly depending on the circumstances in which they are formulated. Policies are typically implemented to prevent certain adverse consequences that have been observed in society or to pursue certain advantageous outcomes. However, the specific direction a policy will follow, either as positive or negative reinforcement of governance in a specific setting, is a function of variables. The most notable of these variables relates to the policy process, which largely depends on the policy players. The players are the individuals or groups that are influential in forming a plan to address the given issue, including the decision-makers, interest groups that lobby behind the scenes to ensure a given policy direction and those saddled with the responsibilities of implementing these policies. The way these players comport themselves is largely dependent on the policy environment, a core determinant of whether the policy process will be participatory or not. A policy process is said to be participatory if it accommodates diverse policy interests, including the target beneficiaries. This simplifies the herculean task of implementation, making effective and positive utilization of state resources.

Unfortunately, the policy process in Nigeria has been characterized by notable contradictions largely rooted in its undemocratic, non-participatory and exclusionary tendencies. This may not be unconnected with the prolonged military rule that spanned the better part of the post-independence development of the country before 1999 when the country returned to democracy. The return of the country to democracy in 1999, raised the hopes and expectations of a better policy-making process. However, the return to democracy has done very little to improve the policy process.

In a country undergoing development like Nigeria, the significance of public policy cannot be overstated, as it serves as the foundation for steering progress. Through the years in Nigeria, adequate implementation of policies has been an issue. Policies initiated by a particular administration are most times aborted by successive governments. Policy continuity in recent times is a challenge, there is no nexus connecting the previous policies to the current one which is detrimental to the developmental drive of the nation. Moreover, in Nigeria, the populace is rarely engaged and mobilized through sufficient awareness and instruction regarding public policies.

Following the establishment of a democratic government, a multitude of policies have been introduced and pursued using different development strategies such as the National Economic and Development Strategy (NEEDS), alongside the State and Local chapters (SEEDS) and

(LEEDS) correspondingly. After the restoration of civil rule, the main emphasis shifted towards poverty alleviation initiatives. Olusegun Obasanjo's government had a key objective of enacting a range of policies, including the National Policy on Education, the National Housing Policy, and the Poverty Alleviation Policy. These policies were designed to provide assistance and support to individuals who were economically disadvantaged and unemployed, with the ultimate aim of eradicating poverty. The focus of Goodluck Jonathan's transformation agenda in 2011 revolved around the revival of the economy, reshaping society, and ensuring political stability.

Over time, Nigeria has implemented comprehensive developmental, economic, and social strategies to propel the nation towards significant national progress. The execution of these policies typically relies on the collaboration between the administration, politics, and the general population (citizens). Nevertheless, in many cases, the formulation of public policies is a relatively straightforward process, yet the challenge of effectively executing these policies remains a significant and unresolved concern. The gap between goals and achievements can be attributed to the key components present in both the internal and external environments, as well as the implementation process. Numerous factors are hindering the execution of policies in Nigeria, which encompass;

- Over-ambitious policy goals
- Inadequate data
- Lack of continuity
- Corruption
- Insufficient requirement evaluations
- There are an excessive number of items on the agenda.
- Lack of ability to accurately recognize issues
- Insufficient determination in politics
- Unattainable policy objectives.
- Insufficient clarity in the definition of policies
- Fragile democratic principles and systems
- Insufficient information
- Fluctuating policy measures
- Insufficient attention to detail in policy implementation

#### **Interest Group Participation in the Policy-Making Process in Nigeria**

- **Monitoring the policy process:** Interest groups play a crucial role in the policy-making process by serving as a counterbalance to governmental actors, thereby promoting effective governance. For instance, collaborating with interest groups in Nigeria on matters related to the budgetary process can contribute to the formulation of well-rounded and all-encompassing budget legislation. Moreover, as laws come into effect, interest groups closely monitor their outcomes, providing updates to Congress and regulatory bodies regarding the anticipated and unforeseen impacts of national policies.
- **Serving as a Link between the Government and Society:** According to Okeke (2014), this position involves managing the flow of communication between the government and the general public by actively participating in essential civic and administrative responsibilities. By serving as a medium of communication between individuals and the government, and for members of a collective as a democratic method of articulating their viewpoints on matters of policy.

- Educating the masses on policy issues: These organizations excel in collecting and showcasing concerns that may have escaped the government's attention. Similarly, the individuals within each group are probably more knowledgeable about the specific topics they advocate for compared to an average politician. Governments often utilize this knowledge to develop well-informed policies that are both inclusive and comprehensive.
- Through Contesting Elections: Interest groups endorse candidates who align with their perspectives to establish a connection with them and safeguard their concerns once they assume positions of power. The Nigerian Labour Congress (NLC) gave rise to the Labour Party in Nigeria. The results of the 2023 general elections have been quite intriguing, particularly due to the unexpected elements that unfolded during the process. Before the election, the Labour Party experienced a significant triumph in prominent electoral events when Dr Olusegun Mimiko assumed the governorship of Ondo state and completed two consecutive terms. The NLC remains actively engaged in politics to prioritize the well-being of workers in government programs and policies. The Labour Party participated in the 2023 general elections and with Peter Obi emerging as the flag bearer of the party gained popularity as it became a revolutionary movement that captured the hearts of youths and many Nigerians yearning for a change, though the party had existed as a pro-workers political organization it changed the game in Nigeria's political sphere and produced a governor, Alex Otti of Abia State, won eight senatorial seats and thirty-four in the house of representatives making it the third most popular party in the 10<sup>th</sup> National Assembly. The NLC holds the belief that an increased presence of the Labour Party in positions of power will result in the implementation of policies that prioritize the welfare of workers.

### **Conclusion and Recommendations**

Public policies are powerful developmental instruments for good governance. In settings that embrace democracy, interest groups play a significant role in shaping the policy-making process at every stage, starting from policy initiation and formulation through to its implementation. This is imperative in ensuring that the policy is sustained, efficiently and effectively. Interest groups monitor these processes for their interests to be projected. Interest groups play a crucial role in bridging the gap between the government and the people by providing policymakers with essential information that can improve the outcomes of policies. According to LaPalombara (1974), current national leaders must recognize the importance of working with groups to achieve their developmental goals. Failure is likely if they try to operate without the support of such groups.

The lack of connection between policies formulated and their effects on the welfare and well-being of the people has hindered sustainable national development in Nigeria, regarding interest group activities. As an illustration, the nation is experiencing a rise in poverty levels, a significant unemployment rate, inadequate infrastructure, and security concerns.

According to Udoh and Ukpere (2011), it seems that interest groups in Nigeria lack a history of connecting with democratic institutions to actively participate in joint endeavours to achieve long-lasting national progress. The extended duration of military involvement in politics could potentially be attributed to this. Instead of focusing on the application of an integrated approach to policymaking and implementation, policymakers should give careful consideration to unique societal issues (Eneanya, 2013). Interest groups play a crucial role in facilitating the accomplishment of government objectives, plans, and programs by actively

participating in the identification of their requirements, preferred methods, and desired locations. The bottom-top approach to governance can be seen in this context. Interest groups play a crucial role in both the apparent and concealed phases of policy-making processes. It is increasingly important to nurture these groups to ensure the best possible outcomes for public policy and sustainable development (Henry, 2005).

Moreover, interest groups must discard any tendencies of inactivity that often perplex their involvement in the process of policy-making. There is a lack of adequate alliance and collaboration between interest groups and political/economic actors, except for instances where they engage with the government in activities such as advocating for human and people's rights or participating in strike actions. Furthermore, it appears that interest groups in Nigeria lack the necessary financial resources to effectively support initiatives that lead to significant improvements in public policies and foster overall development. Gathering information to improve public policies, maintaining an efficient secretariat, and covering ongoing and capital expenses requires a significant quantity of resources. The majority of these groups are operated as individual enterprises. Occasionally, this renders them susceptible to undesirable state influence, diminishing their effectiveness as interest groups. However, the internal organization of pressure groups is crucial for their representative function

The activities of pressure groups and the roles they played in the policy process depend on how broad or narrow the group's interests were, the resources at their disposal and its ties with the governmental actors, its affiliation with other groups and the ideological character of its membership. The study recommends the following;

- Value re-orientation for policymakers to interface with interest groups to enhance sustainable development in Nigeria.
- Interest groups must establish a more robust institutional and organizational foundation, supported by sufficient financial resources and effective administration.
- It is crucial to establish stronger partnerships with like-minded organizations, revamp the existing institutional framework to ensure the efficient implementation of strategies, and avoid disregarding the intended recipients by unnecessary political interference.

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