

DISSECTING THE DIMENSIONS OF POLICY SUCCESS

DR. FATIMA BAJWA

Asst Professor

Government & Public Policy,
National Defence University, Islamabad, Pakistan.

Abstract

Despite the greatest desire for policies to succeed, and abhorrence at failures, academic efforts to write on the subject are rare. This paper explores how successful or unsuccessful a policy could be according to some predefined criteria. It coins policy as having three domains: processes, programs and politics. Policies may succeed or fail in each of these realms, along a spectrum of success, resilient success, conflicted success, precarious success and failure. Criteria for success in each sphere are not categorical but we can argue that they reflect the majority of ways in which policies might be considered successful. The article below gives the examples of policies from around the world and in Pakistan's context according to these criteria. The shortage of literature on policy success is a significant gap in our understanding of the world.

Key Words: Policy, policy success, policy failure, Pakistan

INTRODUCTION

The earliest collective effort to understand “why policies succeed or fail” was made by no less a respectable organization in the field of Public Policy than the Policies Studies Organization (PSO). PSO published an edited book with that title in 1980. The effort was commendable, though the exploration was in infancy even in the discipline of Public Policy as a whole. A reviewer adjudged that there was only one article in the book that provided some “interesting insights into the role of political institutions in policy failure”ⁱ. The topic since then, to borrow from Beryl Radin, has reached ‘midlife’, particularly in the writings of Allan McConnell. This paper tries to explore the different dimensions of policy success by elaborating the McConnell typology and applying it on examples from around the globe and in our country context. Its contribution to the topic consists in the fact that, so far, little effort has been made to appreciate McConnell typology in policy analysis in Low and Middle Income Countries (LMICs). The major aim of this attempt is to provide a direction that would allow Public Policy programs in such countries to explore the policy success/failure further in their context.

Understandably, failure is of greater interest than success. Failure is often an attractive topic to research and policy failure is certainly a more media-friendly topic than success. The scope of literature on failure is impressive. It cuts across academic disciplines such as political science, economics, sociology, public policy and moreⁱⁱ. Leaving aside the literature on specific cases such as UK poll tax, Hurricane Katrina, 9/11, Chernobyl, literature on failures include: policy fiascos, scandals, disasters and pathologiesⁱⁱⁱ political system overload and failure^{iv} plagues, pandemics and viruses^v. On media agendas, bad news is more attractive than good news. Failures also provide opportunities for academics to look for deeper reasons for failure^{vi}. Claims of policy success are always in abundance. They permeate political life and emerge in forums ranging from local councils to assemblies and global forums. Success is simply a matter of interpretation and can always be contested.

Definitions of Success of Public Policy

In an early article entitled ‘The Logic of “Policy” and Successful Policies’, Kerr focused mainly on failure, in the mid of political and economic turmoil^{vii}. She argued that policies can fail because they are inadequately implemented, or do not achieve their desired purpose, so they can be said to succeed when they do not fail. Success might also be the meeting of valued moral criteria such as equity and fairness. However, one aspect of her argument seems unconventional that policies succeed because they do not fail. This means that anything short of outright failure is a success, for



example, 60 percent trains running on time is as much a success as 90 percent. Many people could disagree but perhaps Kerr has a valid point here. Perhaps policies that are not outright failures contain some elements of success even if they are genuinely contested and met implementation failures.

Stuart Nagel labelled success as the achievement of goals and expansion of benefits minus costs^{viii}. Bovens, 't Hart and Peters in their colossal work on success in governance likewise argue that success has two dimensions^{ix}. The first one could be programmatic, 'the effectiveness, efficiency and resilience of the specific policies being evaluated'^x. The second one is political, 'the way policies and policy makers become evaluated in the political arena'^{xi}.

Some writings mention non-failure^{xii}, mixed success^{xiii} and partial success^{xiv}, but these are extemporary terms used to describe specific cases, and are not located within a broader framework. Some case studies define a program's success according to the authors' judgements. Others focus on standards such as goals to key interests^{xv}.

There is substantial literature on failure, including policy disasters^{xvi} scandals, crises^{xvii} and catastrophes^{xviii}. Some, particularly those writings dealing with system pathologies and human errors^{xix} tend to treat failure as a solid fact while others dealing with policy fiascos. Bovens and 't Hart focus especially on construction of goals to the point that failure lies in the eye of the beholder^{xx}. There is also little recognition of various forms of failure, other than that they get worse as we move from emergencies to fiascos.

Three Dimensions of Policy Success

Different actors could be involved in various aspects of policy. Some are involved more in policymaking; others are involved in programme implementation, while others are involved in the political sphere of electioneering and party participation. Criteria for success in each sphere are not conclusive but it can be argued that they capture majority of the ways in which policies could be considered successful.

In this relatedness, there is a need to make sense of different dimensions of policy in order to comprehend the ways in which success and failure may manifest within such dimensions. In addition, tussles between them can explain some interesting features and dynamics of policy. These differences can be found in process, programs and politics. They might overlap, but for analytical purposes can be handled separately.

Process is a conventional concern for policy analysts such as Lasswell (1956), Lindblom (1959) and Easton (1965), who are apprehensive of the means by which societies should make collective choices in the public interest^{xxixxxixxiii}. The tradition continues today in works dealing with policy design^{xxiv}, controversies^{xxv}, problems^{xxvi} and the policy cycle. In ethos, what governments do is to identify problems, examine potential alternatives, consult and take decisions. All such activities involve weighing the pros and cons of various choices such as who, when and how to consult and weigh opportunities and risks of policy solutions before taking a decision. Governments do process and they may succeed or fail.

Second, **programs** are what governments do^{xxvii}. They give tangible shape to the generalized intentions of policy statements. For example, health policy involves dozens of programs dealing with ante-natal care through preventive medicine to death. Programs combine the resources, tools of government laws, public personnel, public expenditure and tax incentives in different ways^{xxviii}.

There is also **Politics**. Some policy analysts prefer to keep politics at a reasonable distance as it is seen as a distraction from a rational form of policy analysis^{xxix}. But if we want to fully comprehend the multi-dimensional nature of policy and what governments do, we need to realise that programs have political consequences. The choices of government (including timing of decisions and different forms of action or inaction) have repercussions for the reputation and electoral prospects of politicians and their ability to manage political plans. Many political analysts have dissected the political fallout of policy actions and studies of political behaviour usually evaluate policies in terms of their relevance to winning votes. Governments do politics and they may prove successful or unsuccessful in this domain.

Presumptions of what constitutes success can take different shapes. The foundationalist tradition



views success as being a fact responsive to positive identification^{xxx}. For example, a government can aim to build a school or introduce a new tax and achieve this immediate goal. A different tradition is constructivist, focusing the importance of interpretation and meaning^{xxxi}. These different lenses view success as de-pending on factors such as values, beliefs and extent to which they can be affected by the policy.

Firstly, this definition recognizes that government can and sometimes does attain the goals it seeks in each of its three realms of policy. For example, a government can succeed in putting together an agreement in order to get some critical decisions or legislations approved. Government may also succeed in producing a policy which augments its future electoral fortunes.

Second, the definition also acknowledges that not everyone perceives government's achievements as successful. An extreme example is the statement of success by an architect of the US rendition program of interrogating terrorist suspects. Its goal was to protect America, and the rendered fighters delivered to Middle Eastern governments are either dead or in places from which they cannot harm America. Mission accomplished, as the saying goes^{xxxii}. Critics have viewed the policy instruments to achieve this success as a crime that 'violates international law'^{xxxiii}.

Third, the definition reconciles, for interrogative purposes, the tension between the objective and dimensions of success. A definition that portrays success as purely a matter of interpretation will fail to capture the true dimensions of goal attainment. Correspondingly, a definition that views success as purely objective would fail to express the subjective dimension of success. Hence, objective and subjective facets of success need to be in-grained in the definition rather than avoided.

The Spectrum From Policy Success to Policy Failure

A spectrum makes it feasible to identify intervening categories between complete success or failure. The McConnell's typology does not nullify the existence of more difficult scientific issues, but, sets out an inclusive framework to understand policy success/failure paradox^{xxxiv}.

Government does what it sets out to do and opposition is more or less non-existent and support is across the board. Many matters of low politics and bureaucratic implementation of routine indisputable issues would be categorised as policy success as government achieves what it sets out to do. The absence of opposition and the existence of universal support may be hard to gain for many complex issues but it is still possible. For example, the Dutch system of dikes and dams prevents more than half the population, living below sea level, from drowning. For realistic purposes, it is advisable to include in the outright success category, policies with minor delays that can be corrected. The remaining standards of success can be identified across the process, program and political dimension of policy.

Process success rests firstly on the preservation of government's policy goals. For example, amendments to a government bill may facilitate the achievement of its goals rather than acting as a barrier. Second there is attaining legitimacy through a general acceptance that the policy has been produced through legal means. Third is the drawing up of a sustainable coalition of similar interests and not just an ad hoc coalition securing the initial adoption of a policy^{xxxv}. Fourth, success may arise from a process which encourages innovation, as in the case of Japan seeking to draw lessons from foreign experiences^{xxxvi}.

In Pakistani context, 18th amendment can be quoted as a process success for the then government. The historic 18th Constitutional Amendment was passed by the National Assembly on April 8th, 2010 and the Senate of Pakistan on April 15th, 2010. Subsequently, the Amendment signed into law by the President of Pakistan on April 19th, 2010^{xxxvii}.

This amendment was supposed to bring far-reaching organizational changes to governance in Pakistan. It was believed that the long standing divides between the Federation and its constituents have been bridged to a greater extent. In this sense of restoring balance between the Federation and Provinces, the 18th Amendment was supposed to be a landmark legislation that could lead to a paragon shift in Pakistan's governance and constitutional architecture^{xxxviii}.

It has been analysed by some experts that the intent of the 18th amendment was to modify the power-retentive effects of previous amendments and to decrease the feeling of mistrust that our provinces had been concealing for each other in absence of power-sharing and autonomy from the



centre. Some analysts have termed this spirit of reconciliation as the ‘new wave of political consensus’ in Pakistan^{xxxix}. The 18th Amendment has introduced two major steps: (a) expanding the scope of Federal Legislative List-II and (b) revitalizing the composition of the Council of Common Interests (CCI). In the new scenario, the Council has emerged as one of the most important forums^{xl}. But, the process of transition of devolution led by this Amendment is passing through quagmires. Constituent units did not have the capacity to take on subjects devolved to them, leading to many inefficiencies and inequities leading to the chances of capture by the provincial elite.

Success in programme terms has become synonymous with successful policy among western style democracies with their evidence based policy formulation^{xli}. As former British Prime Minister Tony Blair famously stated “what matters is what works”. This statement supports the argument that our assessment of success should be based on outcomes and evidence instead of political ideology^{xlii}. By focusing on meeting objectives, many policy protagonists can claim policy success. We might debate the issue of how much of a success a policy has been but examples of broad policy objectives that were fulfilled include the 1990 constitutional integration of East and West Germany, the 1995-99 creation and opening of a bridge between Denmark and Sweden and the switchover to digital television in countries such as Luxembourg, Finland and Switzerland. In essence, governments did what they set out to do.

Program success occurs if the measure that government adopts, including a stance of doing nothing, produces the results desired by government. Again, such outcomes can be captured in specific criteria such as implementation in a manner that produces the desired results. Benefiting a target group is a further criterion e.g. lowering the incidence of breast cancer in women over 60-years-old as a result of a new screening program. Satisfying criteria valued in a particular policy community is also a measure of success, for example, efficiency in public budgeting or secrecy on issues of national security.

The National Action Plan with its 20 points agenda that was established by the Government of Pakistan in January 2015 to crack down on terrorism and to supplement the ongoing anti-terrorist offensive in Federally Administered Tribal Areas, can be considered a success according to program success. As it achieved what it ought to achieve and terrorism came to a sudden halt. Although it was more of a curative rather than a preventive policy but still it achieved its set objectives.

Political success is the holy grail of political elites. One outcome of policies that provide massive political benefits and to speak of the enhancement of reputation of government, its leaders and its electoral prospects. A further criterion is controlling the policy agenda by giving the impression of tackling a problem and marginalizing critics. For example, an urban riot can be defined as a ‘manageable’ law and order problem, as opposed to a ‘wicked problem’ involving long-term racial discrimination and urban deprivation. A final marker of political success is helping maintain broad values of government. For example, a clamp-down on welfare fraud can contribute to a broader government agenda of reducing waste in public resources. For example, the Anglo-French agreement to build the supersonic Concorde jet helped improve relations between Britain and France at a time in the 1960s when relations were strained, but after the Concorde became airborne it was not an economic success and airlines abandoned its use^{xliii}.

Governments face a difficult task. They face never ending stream of problems, some chronic and long standing, others short term. And these are lobbied by countless groups who are often in complete disagreement, have limited resources at their disposal and are scrutinized by a host of often hostile players from political opponents to media. A program can be considered politically successful if it involves a narrow definition of the problem to make it manageable^{xliv}. And gives the appearance of dealing with the problem, this might involve a token policy such as the creation of a new program without any additional funding^{xlv}. In Pakistan’s context, the best ex-ample could be Benazir Income Support Program turned into Ehsaas by the existing government.

Governments all have vision because a government with no vision will not be elected. Greek Prime Minister Andreas Papandreu came to power in 1981 with a vision of change away from behind the scenes influence of powerful, traditional and affluent right wing influence in Greek society. Japanese Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi reformed and brought his liberal Democratic power in 2001 on an



agenda of economic restructuring and revitalisation. Governments tend to want policies that align with such vision, although often the rhetoric of adversarial politics, while in opposition often gives way to strong continuity between governments when in political office^{xlvi}. Our current prime Minister came to power with a slogan and vision of Riyast-e-Madina, he is trying his best but still the vision stays a vision.

The achievements of the Lady Health Workers (LHWs) Program in the 1990s were due to the firm political commitment and will of successive governments backed by the availability of resources. On the other hand, the Social Action Program continued to survive despite its less than expected performance due to continued donor support, as it was the principal instrument of donor investment in the social sectors^{xlvi}.

The Metro bus project inlets government's tenure was hailed by the then political party and its allies as a political success. The total cost of the Metro project, as per government, is approximately Rs50 billion. As a substitute of spending Rs50 billion on the bus service, we could have used these funds on our education, despite the fact that our official figures say that our literacy rate is 58%. The metro project could also be labelled as resilient success which is described below.

Resilient Success Opposition and shortcomings make this a second best outcome. But, as long as the measure is resilient it will not fail. In this situation, the level of opposition is more than government bargained for, but is nevertheless outweighed by levels of support. There are departures from one or more goals across the process, program and political realms. Resilient process success means that government achieves its policy in broad terms despite small setbacks, for example, some opposition amendments are added to a bill. Resilient programs are survivors. Shortfalls, although not insignificant, do not undermine their core achievements. For example, a program in 90 countries to vaccinate against measles, mumps and rubella, has led to a substantial reduction in the incidence of the disease(s), despite exposing a small number of children to health risks. Insofar as political bargaining leads to compromise, politics must be prepared to settle for a second best outcome or else see their aims frustrated for a lack of agreement^{xlvi}.

Resilient success can also be termed as durable success. It is important to note that there is no magical state of affairs where success becomes durable, rather than total, or where modest policy failures become big. Such matters are contested. But this category becomes useful in identifying many so called policy successes. They might not be epitomes but they are survivors. In our country context, recent example of this type of success is lockdown where the ban on outside activities proved to be partially successful in the wake of this corona crisis.

Conflicted success is a struggle for government. It achieves its policy making goals in some respects, but has to backtrack or make significant changes along the way. Conflicted program successes are not what was intended. Advocates are troubled by significant time delays, considerable target shortfalls, resource shortfalls, and communication failures. The program generates substantial controversy, stirring opposition parties and forcing government into a defence of core values of the program, coupled with reviews and amendments.

Conflicted politics, as Lasswell recognized, is in part a product of competing values^{xlvi}. Fischer's work indicates that to achieve political stability requires resolving value conflicts by proponents of a program accepting a modicum of conflicted success^l. In a nutshell, conflicted successes allow government partially to achieve its goals, but it gets less than it bargained for in terms of outcomes, and more that it expected in terms of opposition.

Conflicted success is still a success but there is a high level of conflict over whether the policy has succeeded or failed. A good example of conflicted success is NAFTA, the North American Free Trade Agreement between US, Canda and Mexico which was established in 1993. NAFTA continues to survive but has staunch supporters and critics in equal numbers. In our context, Metro project is an excellent example of conflicted success.

Precarious success operates on the edge of collapse. Policies do exhibit small achievements, but departures from goals and levels of opposition over ride small levels of support. They often amount to a pyrrhic victory for policymakers. Initially government does fulfill some of its policy making goals, but the costs of doing so become such that short-term success cannot be sustained.



Precarious program successes have some merits for its advocates but outcomes fall well short of intentions and controversy is huge. Even supporters seriously question the future of the policy. Polio eradication program in Pakistani context is a good example of precarious success. The initial success of the Polio Eradication Initiative in Pakistan was remarkable. The number of confirmed cases of poliomyelitis based on acute flaccid paralysis surveillance data, from across the country declined from 1155 cases in 1997 to 28 in 2005 the lowest ever recorded in one year. A very sensitive nationwide reporting system was built up to assure the detection of all remaining polio cases. However, since 2007, there has been a marked resurgence of polio cases, in 2008; eight cases were reported in Punjab, the largest province in Pakistan, home to more than 60% of the country's population, compared to zero cases reported in 2007. Failure to achieve polio eradication demonstrates the importance of determinants outside the health sector in influencing health status. The resurgence of polio in areas far from the western border, such as in Punjab province, indicates that weaknesses in the delivery of services and broader issues of health systems' governance are a major factor in the failure to achieve eradication^{li}.

Precarious successes are often transient, en route to failure and termination. For example, the Child Support Agency in the UK, introduced in 1993, struggled, with its achievement in making 'absent fathers pay' defied by scandals and controversy leading to its closure in 2008^{lii}. Precarious political successes are a significant liability for government, even if there are small benefits. The political benefits of hanging onto a policy exist and are small but the costs are greater. The Nixon administration and the final years of the Vietnam war is arguably one such example. All the Bush administration and Guantanamo Bay prison camp example is pertinent here. Politically the tough on terrorist rhetoric helped Bush's 'war on terror' post 9/11 but was more than counterpoised by the political damage among the political community.

Policy Failure

As argued above, a policy fails as it does not achieve its goals that advocates set out to achieve and no longer receives support from them. Those supportive of the original policy goals are liable to perceive with regret, an outcome of policy failure. Opponents perceive the failures with satisfaction because they did not support the original goals. In a similar vein to policy success at the opposite end of the spectrum, there are probably few policies with zero progress toward the goals. The policy failures in our country context would be dealt with in detail in the next series of articles but at the moment some examples of policy failures are illustrated below:

The failure of educational policy in developing countries is largely attributed to the issues of poor implementation. Pakistan is no exception to this; there have been many examples where educational programmes failed to achieve desired outcomes. Some examples are the failure of mega projects as the Social Action Programme (SAP I & II), the Sindh Primary Education Development Project (SPEDP), the Girls Primary Education Development Project I & II (GPEDP), the Primary Education Curriculum Reform Project (PECRP) etc^{liiiiv}. Many teacher education programmes carried out by the government were found not to correspond with the stated goals of policy^{lv}. Various five-year plans had also acknowledged that on most occasions the policies failed at implementation level. The fourth five-year plan (1970-75) raises the criticism, particularly referring to education, that often 'the priority accorded to education in the drafting of plans, however, has not always been reflected in the implementation of plans' ^{lvi}. This inconsistency results in plans failing to meet their desired objectives.

One of the critical issues related with the health policy 2001 was a lack of synchronization with other guiding initiatives like the Mid Term Development Framework (2005-2010), Poverty Reduction Strategies Papers, Millennium Development Goals, Provincial level strategic frameworks and Medium term budgetary framework processes; where some of the policy initiatives are ignored while new focuses introduced that were not in the policy agenda^{lvii}.

The zero draft of health policy 2009 also highlights that the 2001 policy was ineffective in terms of producing a measurable impact on intended beneficiaries. It was also unbalanced in terms of benefiting relatively more urbanites and it is gender insensitive^{lviii}. The draft policy of 2009 was also sometimes referred to as 2011 policy. However, it is evident from above policies that the



implementation of policies has been a major problem right from the start without looking into the factors leading to the non-implementation of policies. It seems that all these were long documents, which were addressing the core health issues on just the paper. There is an evident disconnect between the policies since the beginning.

Several crosscutting maternal and child health system issues have policy and programmatic implications, which include weak policy and planning capacity at the federal and provincial levels. Inadequate information system and limited use delay evidence based policy development. Segregation of reproductive health services under two ministries is responsible for duplication of effort, system inefficiencies and poor coordination. Provincial health departments have not shown themselves to be great implementers of programs. Many programs are implemented vertically and often do not talk to each other. The result is that directorates in the provinces have remained weak and coordination poor^{lix}. Lack of clear policy in the development of human resource for maternal services and poor personnel management practices has been a major contributor to poor performance. In the absence of a clear policy and framework for the for-profit sector, commercial interests are taking priority over social goals.

Some patterns were evident in Pakistan's population policy on two levels. First is the political context in which the policy of 'population control' has been rooted. This context has been influenced to varying degrees during the Ayub, Bhutto, and Zia periods by the role of religion in politics, the influences of Western donors, the effect of international development ideology, and the political utility of the population programme to each government. Second, over the last seven decades, Pakistan's population programme has been riddled with problems of implementation that have essentially remained unchanged. These include an over-centralized and bureaucratized programme which relies too much on the power of 'key individuals', a poor working relationship between the government and non-government sectors, and a lack of coordination between population and health within government. These deep-rooted structural problems within the programme cannot be resolved without addressing the policy context in which they have evolved^{lx}.

The authors strongly believe that COVID-19 policy of government of Pakistan is a failure as well and is evidence based. With over 108,000 COVID-19 cases, Pakistan has passed the official count in neighbouring China, the country first hit by the novel coronavirus. Officially projected figures suggest positive cases in Pakistan have reached 125,000 by June 15. Yet thanks to the government's contradictory public messaging, a majority of Pakistanis still haven't registered the danger. Pakistan now has the 16th highest number of corona cases in the world, but the government's public messaging and decision making have yet to assume a clear direction^{lxi}.

The pandemic, if it continues to be underplayed by the government, may pose a daunting challenge for the political leadership, causing a serious health crisis in a country of 220 million people with a weak healthcare system.

Conclusion

Locating policies in particular categories involves judgement rather than scientific theory^{lxii}. Judgment is a must because policy outcomes do not always have crisp results. Different outcomes may occur within one particular realm or there can be different outcomes across the process, program and political dimensions of policy. The result is that a policy can be much more successful in one domain than in another. There is definitely a trade-off for policymakers between three realms of policy. Endeavouring for success in one realm can mean sacrificing, intentionally or otherwise success in another. Such trade-offs and tensions are at the heart of dynamics of public policy. Understanding policy success/failure is not rocket science though a complex one, but this should not stop us to explore it further.

Way Forward

This paper tries to explore the different dimensions of policy success/failure by adopting the McConnell typology and applying it on examples in our country context. Its unique in the sense that nobody has yet used this typology in policy analysis in Low and middle income countries (LMICs). Despite an abundance of claims to success, there is surprisingly little written on policy success. The shortage of literature on the topic is in itself a significant gap in our understanding of it. Scholars

and writers of public policy lack a framework with which to make sense of the complex nature of policy success/failure with all its complexities and contradictions. There is also a lack of framework with which to understand many related and complex issues and also the popular political rhetoric by governments both in developing and developed world that their policies are working.

This paper is a humble attempt to untangle this complexity but would be turned into a series of papers by digging deep into both popular and unpopular policies, by following the historical trajectory of Pakistan's different political eras and come up with policy recommendations, as to how the policies could stay in the success spectrum instead of following onto failure side. The policy failures would be revisited in detail. The primary aim at the moment is to help demystify the complex phenomenon of policy success. It cannot be claimed to be the last word on the topic but such attempts just aim to provide a direction that would allow us to explore this puzzle further. The secondary aim is to use this framework of typologies to rethink many established models of public policy.

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