

Understanding Theoretical Framework of Social Safety Net Programs in Bangladesh

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Abstract: Public policy formulation is an integral part of the government to provide essential services to its citizens. The Social Safety Net program is one of them. However, available studies on the policy process in Bangladesh have not explored the detailed procedures and tendencies of the policy formulation process. Therefore, the principal objective of this paper was to investigate the theoretical framework of the public policy-making process in Bangladesh. Based on secondary data sources, this paper argues that there are no analogous policy frameworks that can analyze all social safety net programs in Bangladesh. However, the public choice and institutional frameworks are more feasible than other models in the policy-formulation process.

Keywords: Public Policy, Policy Framework, Social Safety, Public Choice Theory, Institutional Theory.

1. Introduction: Print and electronic media always provide us with instant access to different types of news, entertainment, various public policies, and many other things that shape our thoughts and influence our lives. Therefore, we can say that our daily lives are surrounded by public policies, laws, and governance. Public policies, ranging from zero-tolerance against drug peddlers to heavy investments in mega projects such as the Padma Bridge, Metro-rail, and nuclear power plants, impact our everyday lives. For example, COVID-19, for example, shows vehemently the significance of sound public policy to keep our lives safe from jeopardy and risk. Social safety net programs have become the epitome of protecting underprivileged people from intolerable suffering in this pandemic time. They have helped people not go under the poverty line, one of the worst acts of violence against humanity.

Since its inception as an independent country, Bangladesh has implemented many social safety net programs to lift ordinary people out of poverty. All governments have introduced new social safety net programs to reduce poverty and improve the overall condition of poor people. After fifty years of independence, Bangladesh has become an example to curb the poverty rate and improve other social indicators. Bangladesh is now in better condition than India and Pakistan in terms of many social indicators. This paper attempts to fit models to evaluate Bangladesh's social safety net programs based on secondary data sources.

2. Theoretical Framework:

2.1 Understanding Model: A model represents reality and gives us an idea about particular issues or things. Models are essential because they simplify things and shed light on our thoughts about political affairs and public policy. While various definitions of the term 'model' have been suggested, this paper will use the definition suggested by Thomas A. Dye (2017), who said 'a model is a simplified representation of some aspect of the real world'. A model, therefore, is nothing but the representation of our thoughts and ideas in a simple way. For instance, David Easton's model of the political system (1979) presents a framework of a political system where he defines politics as "an authoritative allocation of values". In contrast, citizens' demands work as 'inputs', and governments' policies are considered "outputs."

This paper examines the social safety net policy formulation process in Bangladesh based on a special report published by Prothom Alo, the leading Bengali newspaper in the country. This paper considers public choice theory, which is a subfield of rational choice theory, almost perfectly fits the case. Moreover, it recognizes other relevant models, particularly the "institutional model," to analyze the case.

3. Model-A: Public Choice Theory: Public Choice Theory, as many policy theorists refer to it as "rational choice theory" or its sub-division, was introduced by a few economists and political scientists to explain human behaviour in the decision-making process. Adam Smith, the founder of "dismal science", called the human being a 'rational calculator' because they make decisions by collecting information and calculating which actions will help them achieve their aims without being too costly. Later, US economists like James Buchanan (1962); Anthony Downs (1957); William Niskanen (1971); political scientists like Mancur Olson (1968); Kenneth Arrow (1951); and William Riker (1962) played a significant role in the development of public choice theory.



Figure 01: Public choice theory and its working process. Source: Author, based on Anthony Downs' (1957) analysis

Public Choice Theory has been developed based on two central concepts to understand the public policy process. Firstly, it defines the human being as "homo economicus"—securing material benefits through self-interested actions. Secondly, people can be seen as "homo politicus"—taking full advantage of social welfare motivated by public-spirited political engagements. Policy theorist Thomas Dye (2017) stated the significant points of the model as: "policy as collective decision-making by self-interested individuals". The core assumptions are following:

- Humans are innate self-interested.
- Decisions are drawn from the cost-benefit analysis.
- Politics is a marketplace where voters buy policies and sell votes; politicians buy votes and sell policies.
- Individuals and political leaders seek to maximize their benefits in politics.
- All the choices are determined by context, partly gender, class, job, culture, religion.

3.1 Fitting Public Choice Theory in the Case: Actors of the Case

- **Individuals:** Beneficiary people maximize their benefits from the political market and public policies
- **Political Leaders:** Interested in politics when returns of the public offices outweigh the costs
- **Governments and Organizations:** Any political regimes or organizations of various interest groups secured their profits through elections, discussion, and even violence, if necessary.

3.3 How is the Model Fitted in the Case?

- **Individuals:** According to the report, many people who are not eligible should not register their names on the list according to the programs' rules but get some allowances. In patron-client politics, existing government supporters think they have the right to obtain material and other benefits from the political market as they have voted for the leaders. It does not imply that so-called neutral and ordinary people are uninterested in obtaining the most benefits from politics. Individuals cast their votes to obtain the maximum number of facilities from governments.
- **Politicians:** Though the election is only a legitimate means of capturing power, politicians sometimes use muscle and money power to get a public office. However, in this case, local political elites use social security programs to ensure their victories in the election. It means holding public offices for political leaders or parties is very important that make more significant returns outweigh the election costs.
- **Governments:** Securing and maintaining political legitimacy through elections or consent and the social contract. In this case, the government has provided nearly one-hundred-fifty social safety net programs for the insolvent and needy people. These programs have strengthened government legitimacy, which is more important to them.

3.4 Model-B Institutional Model and the Case: US economist Douglass North (1990) defined the institution as the "humanly devised constraints that shape human interaction." These limitations are the "rules of the game" and exist in formal and informal appearances in our everyday lives. This definition apprehends three crucial elements that define institutions:

- Individuals determine themselves as members of society.

- They place constraints on behavior.
- They shape behavior by determining incentives.

According to traditional and new Institutional theorists, policies are merely institutional output. Political and economic institutions played a significant role in making policies for a country. Political institutions, including legislature, courts, and bureaucrats, are responsible for creating an institutional framework that confiscates old policies or amends those and makes new policies.

3.5 Actors of Institutional Model in the Case: Different formal and informal institutions like the legislature, judiciary, executives, prime minister, president, bureaucracy, traditions, customs, norms, values, to name a few. According to the case report, different governmental institutions introduced social safety net programs or projects across the country. The constitution of independent Bangladesh (articles 26 to 44 of chapter-3) has maintained the fundamental rights of the citizens. To show respect to the constitutional bindings, government institutions such as parliament, court, bureaucracy have been responsible for advancing peoples' living standards. In this respect, social safety net programs have been devised and affected by public institutions.

3.6 Fitting Institutional Model in the Case: The government and its institutions adopted distinct policies, and people approved those programs by consent through regular elections, sometimes regimes use coercion, if necessary, to legitimate the policies. In this case, governmental institutions introduced the social security policy, and people recognized the programs. However, the problems in the case have arisen in response to the lack of proper compliance with the policies formulated to provide social security benefits to the actual needy people. Though the central and local institutions were responsible for monitoring the services, achievements are not yet.

4. How to Fix the Issues: This paper would like to offer some recommendations to enhance the efficacy and functionality of social safety net programs.

- **Addressing Irregularities:** Coordination between local political elites and public officials can plummet several irregularities that paralyzed the programs. Public awareness village programs are very much helpful to eradicate indiscretions.
- **Institutional Reform:** Institutional drawbacks halted the effectiveness of social safety net programs. The present institutional structure has given sole responsibility to the local political leaders to identify the vulnerable people. Consequences, widespread nepotism, corruption, and favouritism have frequently been occurred by both political actors and the concerned people. A new institutional structure must be introduced in which concerned people will be selected for the programs based on their annual income certified by local politicians and bureaucrats. An online application system can be introduced for making a fair list of needy people.
- **Improving Governance:** Governance is the ability to make decisions and implement the rules. Bad governance is highly responsible for irregularities in distributing social welfare programs. Ensuring punishment can help to attain the benefits of the programs.
- **Ensuring Transparency and Accountability:** Upholding Transparency and Accountability from distributing cards to implementing the programs effectively breaks down the patron-client relationship, which is a massive barrier to making a fair list of social safety net programs.
- **Moral Response:** Ethical support is essential from ordinary people to political elites to make programs efficient and functional. Informed and responsible citizens who likely never or less indulge in nepotism and corruption are essential for making the programs workable.

5. Conclusion: The case of social safety net programs can be assessed through different models of the public policy process. However, this paper attempts to fit *public choice theory and institutional model* to examine the case published in the Daily Prothom Alo. Both institutions and the calculating behavior or nature of human beings are responsible for the dysfunctionality of the programs. Therefore, we can easily explain the case using two public policy models to understand the situation and issues that are going on with social safety net programs.

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