P03 / (In)action in Public Policy

Topic : INEQUALITIES AND PUBLIC POLICY

Chair : Advaita Rajendra (Indian Institute of Management, Sirmaur)

Second Chair : Ankur Sarin (Indian Institute of Management Ahmedabad)

GENERAL OBJECTIVES, RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND SCIENTIFIC RELEVANCE

Despite its limitations, “what governments do” has served to be an enduring definition for public policy. Among the many things that governments do as they try to “tame wicked problems” (Rittel and Webber 1973; Crowley and Head 2017), they also look away (Mander 2015), exclude and reinforce inequalities (Schneider and Ingram 2005). Although not limited to them, feminist, dalit, black and other voices have drawn attention to experiences of being invisibilized (Star & Straus, 1999; Hatton, 2017; Daniels, 1987; Singh, 2014). Accounts of being devalued and dehumanised via (in)action (McConnell and ’t Hart 2019) are often central to these accounts; accounts that have also come to the forefront from an anthropological turn in public policy (Wedel et al. 2005) that have pointed to the deliberateness of policy (in)action and not just spaces of oversight or ignorance.

Talking (to and about) policy is important to jolting policy decisions out of (in)action. Contemporary policy landscape of (in)action is rife with dilemmas of (in)action (Howlett, 2009). For example, several discussions on worker safety, substance abuse, sex-selective abortions, dowry, pollution, climate change, have been wicked and often fall into easy framings of deviant, normalise, disillusionment. Unlike the global north, where formal governmental committees, formal hearings and appeals may be invited even from dissenting voices, several regions across the world dissenting voices are actively punished.

In some contexts, it might be particularly important yet difficult to bring on board those who are being invisibilized through (in)action. For example, in problems like Climate Change, conversations with the most important stakeholders, future entities, like the future biodiversity (including animals, plants and humans) does not seem possible. How does one challenge inaction, with the current stakeholders without encouraging dystopian disillusionment. As boundaries between truth and falsehood are blurred, in times defined by a ceaseless access to information, poses further challenges to policy inaction (Fisher, 2020, 2021; Boullosa, 2022).

CALL FOR PAPERS

Entering and challenging spaces of policy (in)action poses unique theoretical, epistemic, methodical and empirical challenges and we invite work that several questions around (in)action in policy:

1. What are the origins of (in)action? In what forums and how can accountability be ascribed for the absence of action that lacked articulated responsibility in the first place?
2. How and where do voices speak when they are not recognized? How can issues come to matter when they are assumed to not exist?
3. What strategic communication choices do those working towards challenging inaction?

We invite academic as well as practical accounts grounded in the pursuit of promoting ideas of justice, fairness and equity in public policy. Recognizing the sustenance of (in)action to be situated in existing ways of knowing and colonised forms of understanding, we are particularly keen to bring together work that attempts to critically challenge dominant reference frames. While we would like to emphasise rigour, we advocate for benchmarks that are defined by the resistance – epistemic and practical – the work poses to exclusions rather than conformity to privileged forms of inquiry. We specifically encourage conversations with a diverse and creative use of methodology. For example, action research projects may help us understand the horizon of possibilities. While questioning norms around what constitutes good evidence, the panel encourages reflective papers on what good bars might be when discussing methodological questions, like causality in complex systems.

The panel invites conversations on methods not only in policy spaces, but also in social purpose organisations where funders may demand capturing different kinds of data, raising important questions of

what should count as data.

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P03 / (In)action in Public Policy

Chair : Advaita Rajendra (Indian Institute of Management, Sirmaur)

Second Chair : Ankur Sarin (Indian Institute of Management Ahmedabad)

Session 1

Wednesday, July 2nd 13:45 to 15:45 (D4)

Navigating Education Reform: Transforming Mindsets for Systemic Change

Apoorva Bhatnagar (Dream a Dream)

Sreehari Ravindranath (Dream a Dream)

Joseph Thomas Rijo (DREAM A DREAM)

Amit V Kumar (Dream a Dream)

Education reforms aimed at fostering mindset shifts—from rote learning to holistic development—encounter persistent systemic barriers. These challenges stem from deeply entrenched beliefs, pedagogical practices, and institutional structures that resist transformation. Such reforms, often framed as technical solutions through curriculum revisions, pedagogical innovations, or assessment changes, fail to address the underlying structural and ideological inertia within education systems. Consequently, these interventions reinforce existing rigidity and policy misalignments rather than fostering meaningful change.

A critical limitation of prevailing education policies is the absence of student voices in decision-making. The lived experiences of young learners, particularly those from marginalized communities, remain largely unrecognized within mainstream policy discourse. The issues that shape their educational trajectories—ranging from socio-emotional learning needs to structural inequities—are often rendered invisible, perpetuating a gap between policy intent and ground realities.

This presentation draws on insights from Dream a Dream's work in reimagining education ecosystems through a systemic lens. Our research highlights the disconnect between top-down policy frameworks and localized educational needs, illustrating how policy inaction—or misplaced action—can sustain rather than disrupt inequities.

Through case studies and empirical evidence, we explore how systemic reforms can move beyond superficial technical fixes to drive meaningful, context-specific transformations. The discussion underscores the importance of recognizing education as a dynamic ecosystem where reform is not merely about changing policies but about shifting mindsets, power structures, and institutional norms. Ultimately, we argue that addressing these wicked problems requires participatory approaches that center young people's voices, dismantle entrenched hierarchies, and foster collective agency in shaping the future of education.

Keywords: Education reform, Wicked problems, Mindset shift, Policy changes,Voice and recognition

Addressing Educational Inequities in Early Childhood Care: The Role of Public Policy Inaction and Digital Transformation in Anganwadi Centers

Shalini Kumari (Magadh University)

The interplay between public policy inaction and digital transformation in addressing educational inequities forms the crux of this study. Focusing on Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) within Anganwadi centers in Bihar, India, this research critically examines how systemic (in)action contributes to persistent inequalities in cognitive development, parental involvement, and child nutrition. Assessing 712 children across 20 centers, the study reveals significant gaps: 7% of children consistently underperform in cognitive domains, 68.67% experience limited parental engagement, and 16% face stunted growth. These outcomes underscore the deliberate oversight and resource inequities embedded in policy implementation. Leveraging digital tools, the study proposes evidence-based interventions, including e-learning platforms for Anganwadi workers, progress-tracking applications, and parent engagement technologies, exemplified by the Poshan 2.0 tracker. By contextualizing these solutions within justice-oriented frameworks, this research highlights

the potential for technology to counteract policy inaction and foster equity in ECCE outcomes. The findings contribute to the discourse on public policy inaction, advocating for inclusive, data-driven approaches that challenge systemic exclusions and promote sustainable transformations in resource-constrained settings.

Keywords: Public policy inaction, ECCE, Digital transformation, Educational inequities, Anganwadi

The relationship between perceptions of social service quality and subjective well-being (or vice-versa?)

Chen Sharony (Ben-Gurion University of the Negev)

Lihi Lahat (Sapir Academic College, Israel/ Azrieli Institute of Israel Studies, Department of Political Science,Concordia University, Montreal.)

Nir Sharon (Tel Aviv University)

Guy Van-Dam (Tel Aviv University)

This study explores the bidirectional relationship between social service quality perceptions and subjective well-being across 33 European countries, challenging traditional unidirectional approaches. Utilizing data from the 2016 European Quality of Life Survey involving over 37,000 respondents, the research employed multilevel analysis and innovative diffusion maps to examine the effect of seven key social services on well-being, within different welfare regimes.

The findings reveal a significant dual connection between service quality perceptions and well-being, with service quality having a stronger impact on well-being. Childcare and education demonstrated the most significant association with well-being, while social housing and long-term care showed minimal influence. Social-Democratic regimes exhibited higher levels of perceived service quality and subjective well-being compared to other regime types.

A novel methodological approach using diffusion maps uncovered that individuals with higher subjective well-being display more diverse service quality perceptions, while those with lower well-being share more homogeneous views. This pattern remained consistent across welfare regimes.

The study contributes theoretically by advancing understanding of institutional arrangements' impact on well-being, empirically by providing a comprehensive analysis of social service perceptions across European countries, and methodologically by introducing diffusion maps as an innovative analytical tool.

Implications for policymakers include prioritizing services like childcare and education to enhance citizens' well-being and considering the complex, bidirectional relationship between social services and subjective well-being.

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Session 2

Wednesday, July 2nd 16:00 to 18:00 (D4)

Single-mother families: the role of policy in exclusion and inclusion

Greta Skubiejute (Mykolo Romerio university)

Single-mother families are among the most common yet economically vulnerable family types in Europe and beyond. They face the "triple bind" of caregiving, breadwinning, and structural discrimination, compounded by gender inequalities and inadequate policy support (Nienwenhuis & Maldonado, 2018). Policy is a critical factor in shaping the well-being of these families, who are identified as a new social risk (Bonoli, 2005). While some welfare states address the challenges faced by single-mother families more effectively, others lag behind. Lithuania, for example, has the highest poverty rate among single-mother families relative to two-parent families in Europe due to the lack of policy support (EU-SILC, 2023; Skubiej?t?, 2021).

This presentation examines how the social construction of single-mother families in Lithuania contributes to policy inaction, applying the theory of social construction and policy design (Ingram & Schneider, 1993, 2004). It also uses the concepts of decommodification and defamilialisation to explore how single mothers' lives, and those of their children, change after migrating to countries that provide policy recognition and support.

The research draws on a comprehensive analysis of Lithuanian family policy since the country’s independence in 1991, interviews with 15 Lithuanian policymakers, an analysis of current family policy in Germany, Norway, and the UK, and the lived experiences of 30 single mothers who emigrated to these countries.

The findings reveal that Lithuanian policies are heavily influenced by familialism, traditional gender norms, and Christian values. As a result, single-mother families are often constructed as "deviant," stigmatised as benefit scroungers, and labelled as destroyers of family ideals (Schneider & Ingram, 1993; 2004; Skubiej?t?, 2021). These negative perceptions lead to their being framed as "undeserving" of support, perpetuating structural discrimination, social exclusion, and material deprivation. Faced with this systemic neglect, many single mothers emigrate to countries such as Germany, Norway, and the UK, where policies are more inclusive, and single mothers are valued as contributors rather than vilified.

The study shows that welfare policies in Lithuania deliberately exclude single mothers, using policy inaction to reinforce traditional family norms. In contrast, Germany, Norway, and the UK implement policies that actively support single mothers’ economic independence, social inclusion, and well-being. These inclusive measures enable single mothers to pursue better career opportunities, engage in community activities, and reduce their reliance on welfare—challenging the fears of Lithuanian policymakers who view such support as fostering dependency.

In supportive policy environments like Norway, the UK, and Germany, single mothers experience reduced stigma, greater autonomy, and enhanced opportunities. These countries demonstrate how well-designed policies rooted in decommodification and defamilialisation can empower vulnerable groups, breaking cycles of poverty and dependency rather than perpetuating them.

This presentation contributes to the understanding of how public policies can either reinforce or challenge inequalities.

(In)action in Public Policy – Liquor Prohibition in Bihar vs Gujarat: Ineffective Policy Formulation in Bihar, India

Pankaj Kumar Mishra (Magadh University)

Liquor prohibition in India has been a subject of debate, with states implementing it under the Directive Principles of State Policy (Article 47 of the Indian Constitution). Gujarat has maintained a successful prohibition policy since 1949, whereas Bihar implemented prohibition in 2016 with mixed results. This research paper critically examines the formulation and implementation of liquor prohibition policies in both states, highlighting the challenges faced in Bihar.The study explores the socio-economic and public health impacts of prohibition, comparing Gujarat's long-term success with Bihar's struggles. Bihar's policy, despite its noble intent, has led to unintended consequences such as the rise of illicit liquor trade, increased judicial burden, and economic losses. In contrast, Gujarat has effectively enforced prohibition through strict governance, alternative revenue sources, and public participation.The paper also presents alternative policy approaches, including a regulated alcohol sales model, harm reduction strategies, and rehabilitation-focused programs. Lessons from Gujarat and global best practices suggest that Bihar needs a more dynamic and adaptive policy framework to achieve the intended social benefits.

By analyzing the comparative success and failures of liquor prohibition in both states, this research aims to provide constructive recommendations for better policy formulation and implementation in Bihar. The findings emphasize the need for a balanced approach that prioritizes public welfare while addressing enforcement challenges and economic concerns.

Keywords: ***Public Policy, Liquor Prohibition, Bihar, Gujarat Policy Implementation, Socio-Economic Impact, Governance, Harm Reduction***

Urgency yet Deferral: Tracing Policy (In)Action on Manual Scavenging in India

Advaita Rajendra (Indian Institute of Management, Sirmaur)

Ankur Sarin (Indian Institute of Management Ahmedabad)

India has a long history of condemning specific communities to waste work. Although outlawed (in 1950), untouchability and social exclusion of waste workers are social practices that persist. Urban India, often celebrated as a site for 'caste' liberation is no exception. Of various forms of waste work, workers dealing with human excreta - manual scavenging - are one of the most marginalized. Several forms of this work have been made illegal, and government policies have repeatedly promised 'improvements'. However, workers continue to die and their deaths often remain under-reported.

We examine a seventy-five year history of policies and policy artefacts directed at the well-being of manual scavengers and the elimination of the practice. We analyse policy documents that include laws, committee reports and government schemes to understand the contours of policy since India's independence. The policy story of manual scavenging in India cannot be reduced to that of a failed state. Instead, the Indian state's failure to eradicate manual scavenging needs to be understood in the context of a state that has demonstrated a range in its capacity to act – "from woefully inadequate to surprisingly impressive" (Kapur 2020: 1). Drawing conceptually from several scholars who work on negatives like omission (Bathran, 2016), (un)knowing (Alexander and O'Hare, 2020), (in)action (McConnell and 't Hart, 2019), policy disasters (Gray, 1996), we describe the policy journey of manual scavenging by anchoring it in the practices of (in)visibilization that enable inaction by an otherwise 'active' state.