

THEORETICAL AND PRACTICAL DIMENSIONS OF THE IMPACT OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC ON THE PUBLIC POLICIES PROCESS

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Abstract:

This paper aims to analyze, based on qualitative research, how the COVID-19 pandemic may influence the public policy process. Understanding through the public policy process the development of the following steps: defining the problem, implicitly the way in which the proposal entered on the agenda and the actors involved in the process, identifying alternatives and comparing them based on predetermined selection criteria, choosing an alternative and decision making on the choice for public policy proposal, the implementation and the evaluation of public policy, this article proposes an analysis of how each stage of the process is impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic in a general context in which the whole world has changed, is changing and adapting this reality.

Key words: public policy, COVID-19 pandemic, public policies process, impact

JEL classification: M48, O21, Z18, D72, G18

1. INTRODUCTION. THE PUBLIC POLICIES PROCESS BEFORE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

Public policies are present in every community, are related to the public space and aim to solve problematic situations, especially in terms of the government decision-making management, in the literature there are several definitions given to specialized terminology. "A public policy is therefore a set of measures taken by a legal and responsible authority aimed at improving the living conditions of citizens or designing measures to stimulate economic growth" (Moraru, Bondar și Alexandru, 2019: 14).

“Public policies represent a series of interdependent decisions that consider the choice of the objectives that have to be achieved, of the means and of the resources allocated to achieve the proposed goal in different contexts. Public policies respond to needs that have arisen in society, in order to reduce the gaps in one area or another” (Ionescu, Căce, 2006: 12).

Regardless of how they are defined, we can conclude that a public policy has the following features:

“- it is not approved and promoted by a single act or decision, but represents a group of formal decisions, through which it is implemented public policy;

- it is adopted by political-administrative institutions and counts on the governmental guarantee, becoming obligatory for execution;

- it can be presented in several forms: a legal regulation, a political discourse, a form of restructuring of public services;

- mobilizes resources to generate certain products and services in society;

- has a value load that it promotes;

- is aimed at satisfying certain interests” (Savca, 2011: 34).

Defined in this way, in the specialized literature the public policies are analyzed from a theoretical perspective and implemented at the administrative practical level, in the public space, as processes, with distinctly outlined stages to reach the predetermined goal - solving the need, the problematic situation.

The public policies process involves the following steps, according to Howlett: recognizing the problem, proposing solutions, choosing a solution, applying the solution, and monitoring the results (Howlett, Ramesh, 1995).

Each stage is divided into one or more activities, as follows:

“1. Setting the agenda: identifying the problems, filtering the problems, officially formulating the problems;

2. Identifying, formulating and choosing the public policy option: generating public policy alternatives, analyzing and selecting public policy options, developing the proposal of public policy options and choosing one of them;

3. Formulation of the public policy option: elaboration of a framework strategy, elaboration of the draft normative act;

4. Implementation of the public policy option: adoption of the normative act corresponding to the public policy option, elaboration of the action plan, development of the activities within the action plan;

5. Monitoring and evaluating the public policies: monitoring the public policy process, evaluating public policies " (Păceșilă, 2008: 26).

In our opinion, we consider as stages of the public policy process:

- defining the problem, implicitly the way in which the proposal entered on the agenda and the actors involved in the process,

- identifying alternatives and comparing them based on predetermined selection criteria,

- choosing an alternative and the decision making process on the choice of the public policy proposal,

- the implementation or the putting on practice of the previously chosen alternative

- the evaluation of the previously implemented public policy.

From here, the present analysis aims to identify how the COVID-19 pandemic can impact or impacts every stage of the public policy process.

2. THE IMPACT OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC ON PUBLIC POLICIES PROCESS: DEFINING THE PROBLEM

Assuming that the COVID-19 pandemic affects all areas of the human existence, from the macro to the micro level, and implicitly the public policy process, started with its first stage: defining the problem.

Thus, stating the first stage of the process, we consider that this presupposes the way in which the problem enters on the agenda (from the public one to the decision-making one), defining the problem as clearly and concisely as possible in terms of the next dimensions: political, social, economic-financial, technical and administrative, cultural, environmental, etc. and implicitly the typology of the actors involved in the process from the very beginning of the process. Starting with the agenda setting, the policy process undergoes changes and challenges. The first aspect that has changed the agenda is to change the role of the state in the sense that from any government is expected more and more when any problem has come to public attention.

“With the help of social media, the public can access information quickly, sometimes faster than government employees. The government, on the other hand, only prepared for routine crises such as earthquakes and fires, lacks experience and solutions when facing a novel crisis such as COVID-19. A state of national emergency, however, gives the government extra authoritative power to set strict regulations and implement unpopular solutions, redistribute social resources, and decide priority among different policy issues. A new level of power balance between the government and the public must therefore be reached during a pandemic situation” (Dai et al, 2021: 160).

Some unitary states such as South Korea, Singapore and New Zealand have been lauded for state intervention from the very stage of defining the problem: for their rapid health interventions, border closures and prime ministerial leadership. Others, such as federal Germany, armed with

strong political leadership in the form of Chancellor Angela Merkel, have shown what a well-funded public health system can achieve in terms of patient care and societal intervention (Dodds et al, 2020: 221).

Also, during the COVID-19 pandemic, social emotions, along with policy issues, appear to be important in the agenda-setting process – particularly negative ones such as anxieties, fears, or moral panics.

From this point of view, the entry on the agenda often removes the criteria of rationality, including the transition from the public one to the decision-making agenda is forced by the strong social emotions that determine even the decision makers to take into account to decide the problems. Also, the psychological factor is increased in this period by the press, the media in general, causing the decision makers to be much more attentive to the issues on the agenda and, implicitly, the expectations of the citizens being much higher from the public decision makers.

Moreover, during the pandemic, the penetration of the agenda is stimulated by social emotions, beyond the rational forms of needs, which is determined by an increase of the importance of the public area and, implicitly, in addition to its form of additional accountability, the governments have had to the pandemic period to rebuild confidence in the public agenda and in the ability of this sector to solve problems and even act as such. “Government responses should be able to increase credibility, build up public trust, and reduce critical and negative emotions during the crisis” (Reynolds, 2011: 210).

The construction of the public agenda is strongly influenced by the media, which took in real time and very quickly the information about the pandemic and public problems, which on the other hand fueled even more the state of the social emotion of the population, determined an even greater polarization of the population between the supporters of the public measures and the protesters which once again sensitized the decision-makers. Also, “during COVID-19, detailed pandemic information such as personal protective equipment shortages, the vulnerability of specific demographic groups, and psychological obstacles in online teaching were first reported and made prominent by the public before they attracted government attention and became part of the formal policy agenda. Responding to public opinion promptly has become a new challenge to governments in pandemic situations. Governments can set up new agendas, provide solutions to problems, and ensure accountability to eliminate public concerns as a response to public agendas” (Day et al, 2021: 161).

From this point of view, the defining of the problem, in addition to the dimensions mentioned above, involves establishing a new dimension: the medical one, that of the pandemic, which involves reshaping the problem in terms of indicators such as: social restrictions, transport restrictions, estimating the pandemic COVID-19 potential, the existence of lockdown periods at the state level, the modeling of the vaccination potential against the virus, as well as the state budgeting of the medical sector to prevent the spread of the virus (McBryde et al, 2021).

In terms of the actors involved in the literature, there has been an emphasis on increasing the importance of governments in managing pandemic problems, but also by imposing forms of inter-institutional collaboration on problem management, which is referred to as “collaborative governance” (Megawati et al, 2020).

“In a pandemic emergency situation, it is not only the responsibility of the government, but collaborative governance is needed because collaboration with each stakeholder can sit together in a forum, build understanding and commitment and a sense of responsibility to immediately end this pandemic. the forum referred to in collaborative governance synergies with the formation of a task force to accelerate the handling of Covid-19 at the central and regional levels” (Megawati et al, 2020: 312).

From this point of view, the border between the public and the private sector becomes much more flexible in a world characterized by a pandemic, even if the public policies are the result of solving public problems, the collaborative governance can also include private sector actors: non-governmental organizations, private hospitals, companies, media trusts that have been activated in

order to guarantee sanitary materials or other materials and goods and services to prevent the spread of the virus.

3. THE IMPACT OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC ON PUBLIC POLICIES PROCESS: DEFINING THE ALTERNATIVES

In a world characterized by the pandemic, a first aspect that the creators of public policy alternatives must take into account starts from the new definitions of the problem. Any policy alternative cannot ignore the limitations imposed by the forms of social distancing, movement restrictions, existing resources and those already mobilized in the medical sector.

From this point of view, we consider that in addition to the classic criteria that policymakers considered for identifying and comparing alternatives, such as efficiency, effectiveness, costs, benefits, fairness, equality, justice, freedom, etc., the pandemic context has limited more and more the resources of the states and mobilized them especially to the medical sector, determining the rethinking of the criteria in relation to which the alternatives must be constructed and compared.

Dunlop et al (2020) consider that „leveraging better public policies and building administrative capacities means to enable more resilient, equitable and effective public services” (Dunlop et al, 2020: 366).

Moreover, the general consumption of the resources redirected to the primary areas led to the period in which the COVID-19 pandemic manifested itself and is manifesting itself, to the rethinking of the number of possible alternatives to be outlined and of the alternatives themselves. In other words, in a world where resources are even more limited for certain areas, the public policy alternatives must be reshaped through their prism, but also through the conditions imposed by the pandemic: alternatives that can be implemented in conditions of restricted mobility of the raw materials, of the social distancing, of the other national and supranational regulations on individual freedoms, interstate trade relations, etc. In other words, rethinking the criteria of the interdependence and of the collaboration are rethought and retracted during the pandemic.

“Perhaps the most critical takeaway from collective disaster research at the marketing and public policy interface involves the extent of interdependence among consumers; businesses; local, state, and federal governments and agencies; nations; and a variety of other constituencies. No one entity or institution is culpable in explaining the disaster around COVID-19. For example, some people’s fundamental beliefs around their freedom of movement may have exacerbated the virus’s spread. Governments, businesses, and consumers’ lack of appetite for halting economic activity and limiting marketplace exchanges also has played a role. At the consumer level, a desire to reopen economic and societal functions and processes was displayed in late April and early May by the well-publicized protests in many U.S. locations opposing the lockdown” (Maqbool 2020).

In summary, we consider that the stage of identifying the alternatives implies a fundamental readjustment to the context derived from the definition of the problem and from the rethinking of the criteria for comparing the alternatives so as to presuppose possible solutions of the most totally new ones, more equitable, for as many beneficiaries as possible, to prioritize the areas of priority over those that may be subject to postponement, which are often distributive or redistributive alternatives, or resilience ones, and, moreover, which may depart from a rational analysis of the previous criteria mentioned in favor of the social pressure activated by social emotions, activated pressure on political and decision-makers.

For example, in Wuhan, patients who suffered from COVID-19, no matter if from urban or rural residence in Wuhan, hometown in Wuhan or beyond, were covered by any of the medical insurance funds and government subsidies, which averaged 65% insurance rates. Due to services provided to people with COVID-19, hospitals have exclusive insurance funds beyond their usual budgets so that they don’t have any financial concerns to accept patients or serious cases in need of ICU (Shadmi et al, 2020).

4. THE IMPACT OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC ON PUBLIC POLICIES PROCESS: DECISION MAKING

Traditionally, at the level of the public policies process, the decision-making involves determining which of the alternatives listed above is chosen to be implemented. This stage can be outlined in terms of decision-making models, such as the rational actor model (Down), the incremental model (Lindblom), etc.. We believe that, on the one hand, mathematical rationality can be influenced by less rational criteria such as the pressure of the social emotions beyond the efficiency, or effectiveness, or by the determination of benefits for as many beneficiaries as possible, but also by the calculation of costs in a world where the pandemic of materials or of the food were announced, etc.

“As a health crisis, Covid-19 has not just impacted the society in terms of physical health but has also churned up the normal functioning of the human order. Today, coronavirus has given rise to a new world order of being ‘masked and virtual’. Where human touch and gatherings were a norm, it has now become an area of concern and something from which one would deviate. Covid-19 has also aggravated various other forms of crisis, such as financial, livelihood, transportation, food, education and mental health” (Singh, 2021:397).

In view of this aspect, we consider that the new realities challenge new criteria for evaluating alternatives, new forms of construction of public policies alternatives and implicitly new forms of decision-making. We consider that the incremental model can no longer respond strictly to the realities of the pandemic world because the characteristics of public problems have other characteristics, implicitly they challenge other solutions differently outlined and which no longer work according to similar models successfully implemented.

Also, the rational decision-making model works and is applied especially in conditions of certainty, in which the rational calculation of the costs and of the benefits is made through the prism of knowing all the variables of the problems that has to be solved. From this point of view, we consider that the decision-making process must be understood and explained in the light of unforeseen situations, never encountered before, without a similar implementation experience. Although, there have been pandemics and crises in the evolution of mankind over time, but, on the one hand, they have been quite long apart one from each other, and any crisis that humanity has overcome had different characteristics, involving an additional management of the risks that may arise at this stage of the process.

“At a macro level, uncertainty and risk can differentially influence policy decisions. It is critical that this insight be taken into consideration by policy makers and consumers as well as by institutions that must consider how risk-related information is framed, communicated, and subsequently processed by target audiences“ (Stewart 2020).

The risk management policies address the primary risk of morbidity and mortality and the secondary risk of health system collapse. However, the governments of many countries, as well as regional and multilateral organisations, have launched another set of risk management policies, aimed at reducing the tertiary risk mentioned in the introduction to this document: namely the risk of the paralysis of economic activities and social services such as education.

Those, „the countries that acted quickly to implement risk management policies of this kind, before the contagion curve grew exponentially have managed to control and slow down morbidity and mortality and to avoid the collapse of their health services, compared to the countries that delayed implementation. This is the case of Costa Rica, for example. And there are other countries, like Sweden, that did not impose quarantines to reduce exposure but that have not reported high rates of contagion or mortality. These policies include fiscal and monetary measures to mitigate the impact of other risk management policies such as confinement, the closure of non-essential business and the sealing of frontiers on national and regionaleconomies. They include schemes to defer the payment of taxes, to provide direct or indirect subsidies to companies, the partial payment of the salaries of unemployed workers by governments, the injection of more liquidity into the financial

system, and others. Both in Europe and in the United States, these measures are unprecedented in their magnitude, even compared to the financial crisis of 2008-2009” (Lavell, 2020: 8).

5. THE IMPACT OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC ON PUBLIC POLICIES PROCESS: IMPLEMENTATION OF THE PUBLIC POLICY PROPOSAL

In terms of the implementation models of the public policies proposals, in the pandemic period it seems that the top-down implementation model is the most common. This is mainly due to the responsibility of the state in the adoption of public policies.

„In this regard, the COVID crisis may provide a window of opportunity for incumbents to centralize and accumulate power and increase surveillance and control, as citizens may be willing to trade-off civil liberties and ideological preference representation in exchange for protection and efficacy in the response. Democratic societies, as a result, might shift towards a new equilibrium” (Amat et al, 2020: 7).

On the other hand, the implementation of chosen alternatives can no longer be seen as a linear, simple, known and incremental process, as we mentioned earlier.

“Full implementation of lessons before an actual crisis is hard to achieve since incremental learning is assumed to be happening in the bureau, but to be truly useful lessons from predictions and simulations need to be revisited and rehearsed consistently. The same is true at the other end of the policy cycle where post-crises public inquiries very rarely result in implemented lessons and institutionalised memory” (Stark, 2019).

6. THE IMPACT OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC ON PUBLIC POLICIES PROCESS: EVALUATION

In order to consider the public policies implemented during the pandemic successful, as well as throughout the entire process, the known criteria for evaluating (efficiency, effectiveness, fairness, freedom, equality, costs, benefits, etc.) of the public policies are not the only ones that still applies and many of them cannot even be applied.

Dell’Ariccia et al (2021) consider that in order to respond to the pandemic world and to solve or try to truly solve the current problems, the public policies must respond to some specific criteria applied to a world in which the pandemic must be seen as a war:

- *“Guarantee the functioning of essential sectors.* Resources for COVID-19 testing and treatment must be boosted. Regular health care, food production and distribution, essential infrastructure and utilities must be maintained. It may even involve intrusive actions by the government to provide key supplies through recourse to wartime powers with prioritization of public contracts for critical inputs and final goods, conversion of industries, or selective nationalizations (...).
- *Provide enough resources for people hit by the crisis.* Households who lose their income directly or indirectly because of containment measures will need government support. Support should help people stay at home while keeping their jobs (government-funded sick leave reduces movement of people, hence the risk of contagion).
- *Prevent excessive economic disruption.* Policies need to safeguard the web of relations among workers and employers, producers and consumers, lenders and borrowers, so that business can resume in earnest when the medical emergency abates” (Dell’Ariccia et al, 2020: 3).

Also, Shepherd et al (2020) propose other types of evaluation criteria when it can be determined whether a public policy implemented during the pandemic period has achieved its goals, has solved the problem of public interest: health beliefs - perceived threat of getting COVID-19; efficacy of prevention methods - efficacy of the following methods for preventing the contraction of COVID-19; trust in public health institutions - the extent to which they trusted various institutions “to provide accurate information about COVID-19.

From this point of view, according to WHO (2020), “the highest priorities in fighting COVID-19 are to enhance whole-of-society coordination mechanisms to support preparedness and response, including health, transport, travel, trade, finance, security, and other sectors, sensitize the public to their active role in the response, engage with key partners to develop national and sub-national preparedness and response plans, and wherever possible, to build on existing plans, such as influenza pandemic preparedness plans, to ensure that space, staffing, and supplies are adequate for a surge in patient care needs” (Chubarova et al, 2020: 61).

7. CONCLUSIONS

The public policy process has involved and still needs to adapt once the pandemic has affected and is affecting the whole world. It is an obvious fact that the governments or actors involved in public policies process have not always responded with the best public policies solutions to new problems and new realities, and the literature and, implicitly, the everyday practices have not yet identified the best possible solutions for the best public policies that have to be implemented in this world of insecurity.

“A growing number of papers focus on public policies during the pandemic and factors determining the success or failure of different countries in containing the spread of this pandemic. Christensen and Lægreid (2020) present the example of how the Norwegian government has handled the COVID-19 pandemic, trying to determine the core success factors. The authors argue that a collaborative decision-making style with the involvement and participation of stakeholders is crucial, and coproduction between government actors and citizens is needed. However, some papers stress the opposite, arguing that a centralized top-down approach limiting certain democratic rights of citizens was the key success factor in Asia (Ang, 2020)” (Chubarova et. al, 2020).

“The majority of European countries were not prepared for the COVID-19 pandemic. They stress the importance of contingencies, national administrative standard operating procedures in preparation for crisis situations, dynamic learning, fast feedback and accountability mechanisms, and problems arising from policy failure and blame avoidance” (Chubarova et. al, 2020).

Regardless of the explanations highlighted above, the public policy process requires adaptation, and the practice must find and develop the best solutions, or better solutions than what has been achieved so far. Thus, both the line of the research and of the practices, are current and must remain in the attention of practitioners and researchers, especially in times of pandemic periods that are leading to the specialization of public policies solutions that should be implemented to ensure the desired results and they do not presuppose incremental solutions as forms of comparison that help in their identification, moreover, to all this is added a polishing risk management necessary for the process itself.

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