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RESOURCES FOR UNDERSTANDING POLICY DEVELOPMENT: DIFFERING PERSPECTIVES

Introduction

Public policies are interrelated plans of action to guide decisions and achieve desired outcomes within a specified time-frame. They can apply to government, private-sector organizations, and individuals. Policy differs from law, merely guiding actions most likely to achieve desired results. One can say that goals are instituted in order to avoid something negative, or to seek some positive benefit.

In order for us to understand the “broad sweep” of policy from different perspectives (government, organizations, individuals), three resources are introduced. Even though each has its own emphasis, there are underlying permeating themes: reformulating public policy to meet changing demographic and economic reality, recognizing the differences between good and bad research, and transforming scholarly knowledge into policy proposals and practical strategies.

Controversial Issues in Social Welfare Policy

Carl Chelf's *Controversial Issues in Social Welfare Policy* represents an exploration of major controversies in the social-welfare policy that examines issues in a concise format, including

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potential solutions. He reports that public-policy controversies escalated during the 1980s and early 1990s "partly due to bitter partisan debate between Republicans and Democrats, a 'divided' government in which Republicans controlled the presidency and the Democrats controlled the Congress, and the rise of 'negative' campaigning in the 1988 presidential election."¹ In addition, highly controversial issues such as abortion, crime, environmental pollution, affirmative action, and choice in education become prominent on the public-policy agenda in the 1980s.

Policy issues in this atmosphere are framed in either-or terms. Abortion is seen as murder or a women's self-interested choice. "One is either tough on crime or too much in favor of defendant's rights."² Affirmative action is quotas or a special interest. School choice can rectify the educational dilemma or destroy public education. In such an environment there seems to be no middle or common ground in which to unite.³

Chelf reminds us that "Reagonomics" contributed to a widening gap between the rich and the poor and this seemed to exacerbate partisan debate and stymie government action.⁴ Lack of coverage for millions and sky-rocketing costs demonstrate the gap between how Republicans and Democrats view public-policy controversies. Let us attempt to better understand major-policy issues and, at the same time, identify important policy areas. Chelf examines social-welfare policy in the United States, identifying the issues of poverty, homelessness, hunger, unemployment, underemployment, disability, the elderly, and aid to needy children and families.⁵

¹Carl P. Chelf, *Controversial Issues in Social Welfare Policy: Government and the Pursuit of Happiness*, vol. 3 (Newbury Park, CA: SAGE Publications, 1992), vii.

²Ibid.

³Ibid.

⁴Ibid., viii.

⁵Ibid.

We can raise the issue whether social-welfare programs do more harm than good; “nonetheless, debate still rages between those who argue for more individualism, self-reliance, and strengthening of the work ethic and those who argue for a more egalitarian society with justice, fairness, and basic well-being for all its members.”⁶ Government’s role in promoting social-welfare programs is not without controversy. On the one hand, during the Reagan-Bush administrations, an emphasis was given on how to help the poor. On the other hand, the Federal government was said to promote fraud, waster, and abuse, according to Chelf. However, at least half of all the U.S. households benefit from welfare programs. The tension between rhetoric and reality is documented in this book, emphasizing the continued need to reassess and reformulate public policy to meet changing demographic and economic realities.⁷

It Takes a Nation

It Takes a Nation: A New Agenda for Fighting Poverty,⁸ by Rebecca M. Blank, written in 1997, is a response to the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996, which abolished the Aid to Families with Dependent Children and replaced it with the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) block grant. It was written before anyone could observe how states would respond to legislation that gave them leeway to design and manage their own public-assistance programs.

Blank argues that strong economic growth has made it

⁶Ibid.

⁷Ibid, viii-ix.

⁸See Rebecca M. Blank, *It Takes a Nation: A New Agenda for Fighting Poverty* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997).

possible for states to concentrate on the design and implementation of the new TANF-funded programs without having to worry about the availability of jobs. The strong labor market means welfare reform has been easier to implement. The longer the labor market remains strong, the permanent gains made by working welfare recipients are greater.

This book attempts to answer two questions:

1. Why has poverty been so intractable and persistent in this country?
2. How can we design and implement a more effective system of antipoverty programs?⁹

Many Americans remain misinformed about who is poor in America today, why they are poor, and how their poverty has been affected by existing public-assistance programs. Thus, one of the book's primary purposes is to breakdown some of the public's myths about poverty and to provide a clearer and more nuanced understanding about why poverty has been so persistent in this country, even in the face of enormous public investment and intervention.

Some of the statements the author responds to include:

- The problem of poverty is largely caused by teen pregnancies.
- Welfare programs encourage unmarried women to have lots of children and spend years on public assistance.
- Today's poor primarily live in urban ghettos and are African Americans, Latino, or immigrants.
- Poor people today are less willing to work than ever before!

⁹Ibid., 4.

- Public-assistance programs have failed and may even have been a cause of high rates of poverty in the U.S.
- The private sector, particularly charities, would do a much better job than the government in helping the poor.¹⁰

Blank contends that there is some truth in each of these statements; however, they are more false than true. Thus, Blank has three general themes. First, over the past decade Americans have misunderstood the nature of poverty in this country. Second, as we found in the previous section, our ideas about the ability of the poor to escape poverty through work have lagged behind the economic facts. Third, we have misunderstood the role of public assistance.¹¹ We will highlight the arguments in that order:

1. In the last decade, we have consistently misunderstood the nature of poverty in America, believing that it is more behavioral, more ghetto-based, and more a problem experienced by people of color. For many middle-income Americans, the poor have come to seem alien and less “like us” than they actually are. Chapter one explores the question of “Who is poor in America today?” and presents a diverse population.¹² The majority of the poor live in mixed-income neighborhoods.
2. The primary change in the lives of the poor over the past twenty years has been the deteriorating set of economic opportunities available to less-skilled workers. The favorite solution to poverty among Americans has always been overall economic growth that creates jobs

¹⁰Ibid.

¹¹Ibid., 5-6.

¹²Ibid., [13]-51.

and helps the poor escape through work and wages. Unfortunately, wage rates have declined steadily on the jobs available to less-skilled workers, which means that employment has become progressively less effective at reducing poverty.

3. "Nothing works" seriously misinterprets history and ignores the real successes achieved. It also ignores thirty years of knowledge about what works and what does not accumulated through observation, experience, and program evaluation.

Chapter 2 examines these major economic changes and the ways in which they interact with the problems of poverty. The author finds that among high-school graduates that work full-time, wage rates have declined more than 10 percent since 1970 and among high-school dropouts, more than 20 percent. Women's wages have not fallen as much as they are still earning no more than they did twenty years ago. Because of their low-earning levels, combined with family obligations, it is extremely difficult for less-skilled mothers to escape poverty through their own earnings, even when they work many hours.¹³

Chapters 3 through 5 present evidence about the impact of government programs for the poor. Chapter 3 reviews major public-assistance programs and policies over the past twenty years and describes recent changes. Chapter 4 addresses the "nothing works" claim to show that many programs have met their goals. To claim that these programs have failed because they have not removed people from poverty is to expect something that they were never designed to accom-

¹³*Ibid.*, [52]-82.

plish. Many originated as a safety net, to give poor families somewhat higher incomes or better access to food and health care than they would have otherwise. In relation to these goals, these attempts have largely succeeded. Chapter 5 discusses the reasons why the government must be involved in antipoverty efforts.¹⁴

Using this analysis, in chapters 6 and 7, the author discusses the future of public policy aimed at helping alleviate poverty. Chapter 6 contains analysis of the current change in public policies for the poor, away from the broad-based redistribution programs and toward more targeted, behaviorally linked programs. Chapter 7 proposes a variety of ways to improve current public-assistance policy. The author does not present one answer but a series of proposals.¹⁵ The book's message is to avoid simple explanations for poverty and the false promise of simple solutions. There is no single cause of poverty, and there is no easy way to abolish it. The challenge is to build a balanced system that relies on the contributions of many different groups and programs. The government has a key ongoing role in public assistance to the poor, but government programs must be buttressed by the behavior of individuals and the involvement of civic institutions, from charities to businesses to community organizations.

Poverty is not a new problem and has been changing over time. As its nature changes, the policies designed to address it need to change as well. Fortunately, these have been tested and shown to be effective. Unfortunately, there is no "silver bullet" against poverty. Many programs produce beneficial but modest results. For instance, incomes may be stabilized, or high-school graduation rates improve. Even as beneficial as these

¹⁴Ibid., chap. 3, [84]-132; chap. 4, [133]-190; chap. 5, [192]-219.

¹⁵Ibid., chap. 6, [220]-251; chap. 7, [252]-289.

achievements are, they will not "solve poverty." Each new policy may not be the "new answer to poverty" and should be viewed as important components within a larger network of programs.

An appropriate antipoverty system is one that works on many fronts. It should provide nutritional assistance and medical care as an underlying safety net to all low-income citizens. It should support employment and make it possible for those who put a reasonable effort into the labor market to support their families. It should encourage all families to be responsible for their children, providing both financial and nutritional support. It should encourage teenagers to finish school and to delay parenting until they are better prepared to raise children.¹⁶ None of these tasks is simple; no single program can possibly accomplish any one of them completely, much less all of them together. Our current array of antipoverty programs recognizes that there are a multitude of goals. Inevitably, this means that they sometimes overlap and conflict with one another.¹⁷

Urban Problems and Community Development

Continuing our discussion, a "must-read" for those serious about policy development for our times is *Urban Problems and Community Development*,¹⁸ Ronald Ferguson and William Dickens, editors. This book addresses urban problems from the perspective of a broadly-conceived vision for community development, entailing social justice, political efficacy, and economic vitality. In this book, economists, sociologists, political scientists, and one historian synthesize relevant research and conclude that forces of

¹⁶Ibid., 292.

¹⁷Ibid.

¹⁸See Ronald F. Ferguson and William T. Dickens, *Urban Problems and Community Development* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 1999).

neighborhood revival are powerful but not immutable.¹⁹ They find that “strategic actions” foster community vitality and make positive differences in low- to moderate-income neighborhoods but often without the support from opinion leaders, policymakers, or researchers. Thus, too much of academia’s approach remains rooted in Civil-Rights methodology and ideology as a national mass movement instead of moving into the “post-modern paradigm.” As a result, the organization that produced the book, the National Community Development Policy Analysis Network feels “that researchers should be more active. . . as members of a team that aims to advance against poverty, disadvantage, and social justice, dedicated to produce research that learns from policy and practice and sharing as much as they can about what it takes to achieve community development.”²⁰

For our purposes, the selected definition of community development is “asset building that improves the quality of life among residents of low- to moderate-income communities where communities are defined as neighborhoods or multi-neighborhood areas.”²¹ Applying this definition of community development, in chapter 2, the editors begin with a broad concept of the community-development system. They demonstrate its utility through a number of examples and analyze the division of roles and responsibilities among participants who have particular powers at various levels of the system and across various sectors. The chapter uses examples from policy and practice to suggest that a well-functioning system is one in which participants have motivation and capacity to perform effectively in project-related alliances, which can have social, economic, and political agendas. Ferguson and Stoutland empha-

¹⁹Ibid., 3

²⁰Ibid.

²¹Ibid., 5.

size the importance of trust and competence in determining how successfully alliances build capacities and make decisions that improve the quality of life in low- to moderate-income neighborhoods.²²

In chapter 3, historian Alice O' Connor shows that alliances in the twentieth century to promote community development agendas at the federal level have been:

- Weak political coalitions
- Undermined by internal fragmentation
- Intellectual marginalization
- Over dependence on volunteerism
- Pervasive racial bigotry
- Internal contradictions among national social policies.²³

She traces the roots of present thinking to the turn of the century and identifies recurrent challenges: basic concepts among caring people have been fairly consistent and include two deceptive and confusing principles when programs begin:

1. The first is that residents should participate in the activities that define and shape their communities.
2. The second is that the agenda for the neighborhood development should be comprehensive.²⁴

Today, comprehensive community development/building initiatives and a host of related activities fall squarely within this century-long tradition.

In chapter 5, Stoutland contends that there are three major themes in studies of Community Development

²²Ibid, 33-75.

²³Ibid, 77-137.

²⁴Ibid., 21.

Corporations (CDCs):

- Community Control
- Comprehensiveness
- Synergy.²⁵

Reviewing these studies, she discusses CDC's missions and strategies, their evolution as organizations and as a movement, the challenges they have faced, and their accomplishments. Regarding mission and strategies, she sees two contrasting orientations that survive as uneasy companions:

1. One is politically activist and aims to right the balance of power and wealth in society, but lacks a feasible and effective strategy for causing radical change and redistribution. CDC directors in this mold know that radical change is unlikely, but they refuse to surrender.
2. The other orientation is that of the housing producer and professional direct service provider, playing by the rules, working within the system in collaboration with residents and funders to meet felt needs.²⁶

Weir and Sampson (chapters 4 and 6) write about "politics, advocacy, and organizing."²⁷ The history of the research of low-income neighborhoods is reviewed by Sampson, identifying limited potential to establish personal relationships. In other words, working with and developing community leadership was a lot easier and effective back in the day when community residents still had a strong sense of community. Weir's

²⁵Ibid., 193-240.

²⁶Ibid., 21.

²⁷Ibid, chap. 4, 139-192; chap. 6, 241-292.

discusses "the effectiveness of protest, participation, and network development as methods of increasing the flow of public and private resources to community-based organizations."²⁸ She also addresses targeting resources in programs as Community Development Block Grants and resulting restraints. "The ideas she develops are for understanding why a focus on community development has become institutionalized in some political environments, but not in others."²⁹

Stone, Doherty, Jones, and Ross (chapter 8) understand that poor schools make unattractive neighborhoods.³⁰ Their focus, however, is bringing together school officials and the community in alliances for improvement. Dickens (chapter 9) reviews "studies on employment and income-generation for residents of inner-city neighborhoods, asking whether living there imposes special disadvantages."³¹

Rosen and Dienstfrey (chapter 10) "review growth in recent decades in the number and sophistication of alliances for nonprofit reproduction, rehabilitation, and management of housing in low- to moderate-income neighborhoods."³² Gittell and Thompson (chapter 11) "consider a number of roles that businesses assume in urban communities. . . and emphasize the importance of network ties and social capital."³³ The authors conclude that among the challenges facing inner-city housing, "affordability" is probably the greatest. Additionally, "resurgent gentrification" is a new phenomenon, requiring attention.

Rossin in chapter 12 discusses evaluation,³⁴ noting that

²⁸Ibid., 23.

²⁹Ibid., 23-24.

³⁰Ibid., 339-380.

³¹Ibid., 24; 381-435.

³²Ibid., 25; 437-472.

³³Ibid., 25; 473-520.

³⁴Ibid., 521-567.

diagnostic evaluation might produce useful results if the methods were more standardized. Ferguson in chapter 13 draws on the previous chapters "to highlight what we know and do not know about various policy issues."³⁵ He observes that what we know about policy issues as the knowledge base for urban problem solving is less complete than one might expect.

Conclusion

To aid in our understanding of policy development, three essential resources have been introduced: Carl Chelf's *Controversial Issues in Social Welfare Policy*, Rebecca Blank's *It Takes a Nation*, and Ronald Ferguson's and William Dickens' *Urban Problems and Community Development*. There are underlying themes running through these resources: the necessity to reassess and reformulate public policy to meet changing demographic and economic reality; ways to distinguish between good and bad research (One study is typically conclusive, but multiple studies point toward the same general set of conclusions.); and transforming scholarly knowledge and ideas into policy proposals and practical strategies.

One can readily see that the theories upon which public policies are supported remain fluid. We must recognize that tested strategies and theory-based empirical research, enabling us to learn from failures as well as successes, are relatively scarce. There needs to be a closer relationship between policy, practice, research, and citizens that enables us to identify problems, resulting in long-term solutions.

³⁵Ibid., 26-27; 569-610.

The authors of this paper argue that the legal system is a complex system of institutions that interact to influence economic behavior. This paper examines the legal system's impact on economic behavior, focusing on the legal system's impact on the legal system's impact on economic behavior. The authors argue that the legal system is a complex system of institutions that interact to influence economic behavior. This paper examines the legal system's impact on economic behavior, focusing on the legal system's impact on the legal system's impact on economic behavior.

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