LIBERAL STUDIES

$\boxed{\textit{Articles}}$

Mihir Bholey[*]

Design-Led Thinking for Improving Public Policy Performance

Introduction

"Design is a funny word. Some people think design means how it looks. But of course, if you dig deeper, it's really how it works," said Steve Jobs in 1996.[1] Design is an essential element of all public services. But there is an understanding deficit when it comes to investigating what design does or how can it be leveraged to improve public services which all policies are ultimately supposed to deliver. Apparently, public policy and design look like two different endeavours having nothing in common. Talking of creating synergy between the two, therefore, may sound a little far-fetched. However, the rising complexity of the modern society requires 'out of the box' solutions and new interdisciplinary approaches. Public policies are not just statements of intent but are expected to ensure efficient delivery of effective public services. Urban transport system, healthcare, housing, sanitation, education, mid-day meal programmes, and a host of other public services are run under different policies in the state.

However, the policies in place for several years often fall short of meeting their targets and societal expectations. The question is, do they require a new approach and method to improve the service delivery? If we just look at the challenges of urbanisation in India growing at an estimated rate of 31.7 per cent, it means 590 million people living in the cities, nearly half of it 270 million will be the working population, 700–900 million square meter space will be required for residential and commercial dwellings, 2.5 billion square meter roads will require to be paved and 7,400 km metro and subways

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[*] **The author** is a Senior Faculty, Interdisciplinary Design Studies, National Institute of Design (NID), Ahmedabad, Gujarat, India.

will be needed to cater to 68 cities having over 1 million population by 2030.[2] These developmental challenges have various socio-economic-cultural and design dimensions. The engagement of design with public policies means meeting the requirement of tangible products and systems on one hand with the application of creative, critical and systems thinking on the other hand to make the service delivery effective and efficient. Several nations are now applying design thinking in making the public services more user friendly and result oriented.

This paper argues that design-led thinking can be used to deal with the complexities in policy design, its execution and analysis. Creative thinking, critical thinking and systems thinking are the three pillars of design. Creativity is essentially a cognitive attribute of problem solving which helps produce options. Critical thinking helps identify the best solution out of the given options. System's thinking refers to the method of analyzing the relationships among a system's parts, rather than the parts themselves. These design attributes can help to solve the problems related to public policy. Since policies are meant to solve the complex and emerging societal problems, they cannot ignore the systematic method of problem identification, applying creative thinking to create multiple options and use critical thinking to find the best option. Today design thinking is being applied to enhance the service delivery of public policy in many countries. Here an attempt is made to examine how the application of the same may improve the policy performance in India.

Public Policy

Public policies are a set of policies including laws, plans, actions, and behaviours of a government. They are plans and methods of action that govern the society in the given legal and constitutional framework of the nation. Policies are a reflection of the intent of the government towards its social commitments and priorities and are considered as the fundamental principles underpinning the set of rules and regulations. Through distributive, redistributive and regulatory policies, governments eventually seek human development. The problems policies address could be as basic as food, shelter, housing, literacy, health, and as complex as environment, urbanisation to host of other economic policies. They refer to the actions of government and the intentions that determine those actions. Dye (1978) defines public policy as: "whatever governments choose to do or not to do."[3]

In view of the growing complexities of society, policies are required to reinvent themselves. Rising democratisation and participatory governance have made the task of framing public policies all the more challenging. Besides,

policies are also not mutually exclusive; they are interdependent. Consequently, policy in one area may affect policies in other areas. For example: policy of Foreign Direct Investment in retail may influence the process of design for the retail sector in India or the environment policy may influence the automobile sector and eventually the automobile design. The interrelations of policies refer to the fact that policy thinking cannot take place in isolation. It is neither feasible nor desirable. Policy making is a 'play' that requires many actors. William I Jerkins (1978) highlights this aspect when he defines the meaning and purpose of public policy as:

> A set of inter-related decisions taken by a political actor or group of actors concerning the selection of goals and the means of achieving them within a specified situation where those decisions should, in principle, be within the power of those actors to achieve.[4]

Thus, it requires a comprehensive, integrated understanding of societal issues and their interdependence, and a scientific approach to design and implement public policies. Harlod Lasswell envisioned the need of 'policy science' (also 'policy scientist') to design the best policy choices. In fact Lasswell's concept of 'policy sciences' and the phrase itself came to light in his unpublished writings of the early 1940s. Lasswell stated:

> My ultimate objective in the field of science is far from modest. I propose to contribute to the systematic theory of the policy sciences. The policy sciences include the social and psychological sciences; in general, all the sciences that provide facts and principles of direct importance for the making of important decisions in government, business and cultural life.[5]

To an extent, Lasswell's view of public policy looks similar to the nature and purpose of design. He mentions three distinct characteristics of public policy which distinguish it from other disciplines. They are: multi-disciplinarity, problem solving approach and normative nature. Besides that, the term 'policy design' so often used in the public policy discourse, also reflects some semblance of design thinking. What creates a likeness are the endeavours of creating multiple options as policy choices, translating thoughts into action, improving the impact and so on. From the rationalist perspective, policy design is a rather systematic and rational venture towards achieving effective policy. Howlett and Lezano (2013) thus define policy design as the effort, to more or less systematically develop efficient and effective policies through the application of knowledge about policy means, gained from experience and reason, to the development and adoption of courses of action that are likely to succeed in attaining their desired goal.[6]

Policy and Design

Service delivery is deeply entrenched into public policy as its key objective. However, achieving excellence in public service delivery may often require a wide range of policy innovations so that the desired ends are met. Dynamic nature of the socio-economic-political environment makes it difficult to achieve the optimum levels of expectation. Broadbent and Laughlin (2004) write:

> Where different political or ideological positions are taken, achieving this ultimate end state is likely to be particularly problematic. That the excellence is sought but rarely achieved rests also on the fact that excellence is difficult to define, distinct from the judgements of 'multiple constituencies'.[7]

As excellence is a moving, and seemingly unachievable target, this has led to ongoing innovations in how to deliver public services. When the expectation from service delivery soar sky high, the traditional methods of service delivery need to be innovated. It is in this context that the role and intervention of design in public policy must be analyzed. Today, in the realm of public policy, the problem is not just about ensuring service delivery but also about maintaining a high degree of efficiency and impact. Thus alternative methods need to be explored. The engagement between public policy and design can be envisaged thus as under:

- Public policies deal with the larger issues of social well-being; and design can help achieve them with its skills, strategies and innovations.
- Public policies articulate intentions and commitment for a larger social good; design possesses the wherewithal to identify, ideate, create and recreate.
- Emerging concept of social design, which is strategies, ideas and concepts required for an equitable society is similar to the spirit of public policy.
- Social design is mandated to engage with pressing societal needs: empowerment, elderly population, health, education, transportation, etc. – in the policy domain these are the larger social agenda.

Social and service designs are the emerging paradigms of design, having immense value for the developing nations like India. Sommer (1983) defines social design:

> Social design is working with people rather than for them; involving people in the planning and management of the spaces around them; educating them to use the environment wisely and creatively to achieve a harmonious

balance between the social, physical, and natural environment…social designers cannot achieve these objectives working by themselves. The goals can be realised only within the structures of larger organisations, which include the people for whom a given project is planned.[8]

Thus, the term, 'social design' has the following complimentary connotations: (1) as a people-centric approach of design; (2) as design's desirability to engage with endeavours of social well-being and livelihood without disturbing the ecological balance; and (3) as the strategic thinking of design in the creation and implementation of policies. It is a way of thinking about how design, in the form of product and process, can be employed in engaging with the dynamics and changing problems of the society. Service design on the other hand deals with the intangible aspects such as efficiency, utility, satisfaction, usability, desirability, etc. It is all about planning and organizing people, infrastructure, material and communication, wherein there may be requirements to improve the quality of service and the interaction between service providers and users.

As far as service is concerned, it creates several interfaces with a series of lateral and vertical interactions and touch points. The healthcare services in India, for example, are structured as primary, secondary and tertiary healthcare system. Primary provides the first level of healthcare at the community level. Secondary is meant for more complex cases and those which need specialised care. They are referred to the secondary healthcare centres at the district levels. The tertiary level includes regional and national hospitals. The vertical and lateral interaction between the user and the service include a wide network of health departments, patients, hospitals, doctors, paramedics, pharmacies, insurance companies and so on. According to the World Health Organisation (WHO), 65 per cent of India's population does not have access to quality healthcare, as such; the gap between illness and wellness is huge. This creates an additional challenge for the healthcare service delivery system which requires an innovation in its design at several levels right from ensuring quick treatment to reducing out of pocket cost. The healthcare sector is a challenge for both social and service designs and thus requires new design thinking.

Design Thinking

Besides the common perception of design being an extension of aesthetics dealing with creation of form and function, it is also an endeavour of innovating processes, improving systems and their interface and refining service delivery. For most of the public policies, service delivery is the key issue and the biggest

challenge too. To meet this challenge, design thinking can give a totally new insight. Lockwood (2010) says: "My point of view is that design thinking is primarily an innovation process. It is a way to help discover unmet needs and opportunities and to create new solutions."[9] Design thinking is a method that applies a creative and human-centric method to the process of problem solving. It is the key to both the design of products and communication.

The same approach can also help in effectively designing larger systems which the public policies govern, as well as meet the innovation challenges, the real world is faced with; such as health, education, urban systems, etc. For a long time design was treated as a secondary intervention in the process of business with its applications confined only to the superficial aesthetic aspect of improvement. However, when innovation became central to design development, it required design thinking. Now, since the second half of the twentieth century, intervention of design thinking in business to garner competitive advantage is a well settled approach. Underscoring the role of design thinking in business, Brown (2008) observes that:

> …design thinking has much to offer a business world in which most management ideas and best practices are freely available to be copied and exploited. Leaders now look to innovation as a principal source of differentiation and competitive advantage; they would do well to incorporate design thinking into all phases of the process.[10]

The application of design thinking may be equally apt for dealing with the issues of the large gamut of public services governed by different public policies. In this context, design thinking can also be looked at as a process of innovation which is human-centric. Here, innovation may involve improvement of the product, communication, technology, systems, user interface and so on. At each level intervention of different nature, often multiple and interdisciplinary actions or designing of actions may be required. Lockwood (2010) further expands the idea of design thinking as a process that lays stress on: "observation, collaboration, fast learning, visualisation of ideas, rapid concept prototyping, and concurrent business analysis."[11] Design thinking helps seek problems which are either not properly articulated or which look fuzzy at the front end. Complex problems such as challenges of urbanisation, healthcare, education, etc often require reframing of the problems at the first instance rather than the usual design intervention of finding the solution.

In other words, it is like zooming in onto the problems and finding the nature of the problem itself. For example, why the commuters of public transport

in India tend to rush and break the queue? Why people litter around the public places and streets? Why the mid-day meal programme (MDM) often fails to meet safety and hygiene standards? Why Indira Awas Yojana, the flagship programme of the Ministry of Rural Development to provide houses to the poor in the rural areas, fails to ensure moderate housing to them? Why private out-of-pocket expenditure dominates the cost financing healthcare in India? Is it just a demand and supply syndrome or something else? These are the issues which cover aspects as diverse as the cultural and behavioural issues, the political system, the economic viability, the technological environment, etc. Thus to improve the service delivery intervention of design thinking, based on problem seeking; multidisciplinary expertise, prototyping, improving system touch-points will be required. Service delivery itself has to be designed to deal with the complexity and diversity of the challenge.

Design to Improve Service Delivery

Baron (2008) says that "thinking is important to all of us in our daily lives. The way we think affects the way we plan our lives, the personal goals we choose, and the decisions we make."[12] Further, Tim Brown, President and CEO of the design firm IDEO defines design thinking as a "human-centered approach to innovation that draws from the designer's toolkit to integrate the needs of people, the possibilities of technology, and the requirements for business success."[13] Design thinking itself follows overlapping and mutually interacting stages connected in a logical process. *The stages are inspiration, ideation and implementation. The first one refers to the problem which inspires one to find the solution. Ideation is all about generating and testing ideas or solutions. Implementation is the way to apply those ideas as solutions.* Design is meant to solve the problem. So it intervenes into problem solving both at the level of the final products and the system level of arriving at the product.

As a matter of fact, product is a sub-set of the larger system such as Metro Rail or Bus Rapid Transit (BRT) being sub-sets of the larger urban transport system or 108 ambulance services being the sub-set of the still larger policy of healthcare and so on. Systems level design thinking can ensure better service delivery because it innovates both the systems and products which are ultimately the final part of the system.

Design thinking is a process which includes creative, critical and systems thinking. Creative thinking involves generation of alternatives. Critical thinking refers to specific aspects of problem solving as well as identification of the most suited solution to the problem. Creativity and innovation have a capacity

to create multiple options. However, to identify which one works best is equally challenging. Together they can facilitate reasoning and decision making. Systems thinking, a derivative from biological science, was first discussed by an Austrian biologist Karl Ludwig von Bertalanffy in 1937. The concept was soon adopted by other knowledge domains as well, to describe a holistic approach of looking at a phenomena or entity. Pourdehnad et al. (2011) describe systems thinking as a "concept of systemic wholeness, which is grasped by looking at the whole instead of the parts."[14] As a result, when an organisation is considered a system; it implies an interconnected complex of functionally related components'. When it comes to design thinking, creative, critical and systems thinking are subsumed in the process.

Buckminster Fuller in his preface to the seminal book of Victor Papanek titled *Design for the Real World* (1971) says that design for him can mean either a mental conception or a physical pattern and further that, "the opposite of design is chaos."[15] An in-depth careful thinking is the way to achieve or create design both in the tangible and intangible forms. Brown (2009) rightly explains that design thinking is not a substitute for professional design or the art and craft of designing, but rather "a methodology for innovation and enablement."[16] So at the level, where solution lies not in product innovation but in the innovation of interdependent systems such as public policies, design thinking can be the new leading light.

Design in Policy Process

Despite the enormous scope, fruitful engagement between public policy and design is yet to begin. So far public policies have not been able to leverage design's strength to their advantage. Governments seek development through policy intervention so as to ensure equitable and just social order; and eventually a good quality of life for the people. Public policies need innovation at various stages of policy cycle: from the policy design to policy execution and even the policy evaluation. Policy innovation through design intervention should not be an emergency measure; rather the way a government should always work. To make design more socially relevant and public policies more user-friendly, efficient and result oriented, their engagement cannot and should not be avoided. As a welfare state, India has a long list of public policies under the distributive, redistributive and regulatory categories viz. urban sanitation, urban hygiene, nutrition, public distribution system, mid-day meals, environment, education, etc. Hence, a huge scope for design intervention for policy innovation exists.

Design Intervention in the Mid-Day Meal Programme

Mid-day meal is the India's largest school feeding programme, reaching out to about 12 crore children in over 12.65 million schools. The prime objectives since its re-launch on 15 August 1995 are to increase enrolment, improve school attendance as well as retention, promote social integration, improve nutritional status of the primary school children and inculcate good food habits in children. The Supreme Court of India directive (28 November 2001) made providing hot cooked meals mandatory instead of 'dry rations' for the state governments. Non-compliance can be taken up in the court of law. However, the programme is fraught with numerous challenges such as enormity of the target group, the scale of the operation, logistic arrangements, inadequate resources, untrained manpower, etc. The biggest challenge is to provide 'hot cooked meal' as per the Supreme Court directive for 200 days. Maintaining nutritional standards of 450 calories and 12 gm of protein for primary and 700 calories and 20 gm protein for upper primary children[17] is no mean task and requires meticulous planning. Therefore, it needs design intervention at both systems and product level. Some of the possible design interventions are as under:

- Networking amongst the stakeholders.
- Reinforcing participatory process by bringing together the stakeholders.
- Bridging the gap between the policy managers and policy implementers.
- Using available Technology innovations to improve operational systems.
- Monitoring attendance and food consumption.
- Infrastructural Intervention whenever necessary.
- Designing kitchen, storage and eating space for maximum benefit and ease of operation.
- Storage of clean drinking water and raw materials.
- Appropriate utensils, *chulha* to facilitate cooking.
- Standardizing the size of utensils to ensure right quantity of food.
- Quick, economic and hygienic disposal of leftovers.

Conclusion

It's not easy to transform the existing system of working. But when the nature of the challenge becomes complex, we need new approaches to find a viable solution. As far as design is concerned, its application may offer different ways to improve service delivery to satisfy people's needs. Institutions like the Design Council (of U.K.), which has considerable experience of working in

the public sector in implementing different policies of the government, also underscores the importance of design intervention in such areas. The Council in one of its reports on design in public sectors (November 2015) mentions:

> In order to deliver a meaningful, sustainable change, the government must ensure design skills are high among public sector workers, at both a central and local level. The private sector hires the best service designers to create the best experiences for their customers. The public sector must follow this approach, and ensure that they have the right skills to do so.[18]

Public policies deal with the larger issues of social well-being, and design can help achieve them with its skills, strategies and innovations. Public policies articulate intentions and commitment for a larger social good; the design possesses the wherewithal to identify, ideate, create and recreate. Emerging concepts of social design, which include strategies, ideas and concepts required for an equitable society, are similar to the spirit of public policy. Social design is mandated to engage with pressing societal needs: empowerment, elderly population, health, education, transportation, urbanisation, environment among others whereas in policy domain these alone are the larger social agenda. These are the future imperatives as well as opportunities for the engagement between public policy and design. Design intervention will help innovate better processes to improve the service delivery by applying measures like user-centred design strategy, which will enable public services to work around users and develop more people/user-centric systems. However, this design approach will require to be embedded into the organisational process and structure at the very outset. Investment in design skills, so rare in the policy domain, will also be required to improve policy performance. It will help in achieving a sustainable and meaningful change. It's a common experience that policymakers and policy managers are adverse to risk taking. However, good design intervention may encourage them to even take risks, learn to make prototypes and iterate in order to quickly spot failures and problems before implementation. Explaining where design meets policy, Bason (2014) rightly mentions that:

> Design can be defined as the human endeavour of converting actual into preferred situations (Simon 1996). This broad definition views design as the process of creating 'new integrations of signs, things, actions and environments that address the concrete needs and values of human beings in diverse circumstances'.[19]

It clearly indicates that design may offer a new set of processes and approaches to problem solving. Buchanan (1990) also reinforces the idea when

he clearly points out the impact of design in four distinct areas which include visual communication, design of material objects, design of activities and services (strategies) and design of complex systems (systems design).[20]

World over, due to the rising complexity of society and governance, policymakers are under pressure not only to make effective policies but also to ensure their effective and efficient implementation. Therefore, new methods are being searched and tested. As India is getting ready to take on the challenges of urbanisation, building of a hundred 'smart cities', 'Make in India' programme, 'Digital India' and 'Swachh Bharat' drive, it will be required to adopt better, efficient, and cost effective methods to implement these policies and programmes. When the nation aspires to transform into a 'new India', there cannot be any better time than this to create a new synergy between policy and design, which will significantly improve the way things work here.

Notes

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