PROSPECTS OF STAKEHOLDER ENGAGEMENT IN PUBLIC POLICY: A CASE OF INDIA

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Abstract

The shift from government to governance necessitated the role of multiple stakeholders in policy process and called for an approach that could optimally facilitate the process. Resulting adoption of the stakeholder engagement approach in public policy from the domain of corporate governance has come as a mainstay as one of the most sought after diagnostic technique for the achievement of good governance in the realm of public delivery. Although the concept of stakeholder engagement possesses an imported character, it is being widely practiced across all kinds of public and private organizations whereby the various stakeholders enjoy the opportunity to influence decision-making in a desired manner. Public policy process has also acknowledged and made use of this concept as a tool, both formal and informal, for policy development, monitoring and evaluation realizing and admiring the intertwined interests of the two domains, as also the stakeholders getting increasingly involved into the process of public policy thereby enabling better alignment of the public policy with their needs and aspirations than ever before. Public policy and governance are closely interwoven and interdependent for their efficiency and efficacy. It is due to the shift experienced in both these spheres as a clear impact of the global changes of neo-liberalism and globalization that enhanced role has been assigned to informed, aware and proactive stakeholders. Stakeholders hold a substantial position in terms of institutional framework as well as achievement of the established goals. Stakeholder engagement, an effort towards collaborative partnerships and proactive involvement towards the exchange of information, ideas and resources critically important for a contextual policy perspective, therefore, forms an integral part of present times policy process and is a significant determining factor in policy development right from identifying priorities to drafting a blueprint, from formulation to implementation, for decision-making and monitoring at all levels. The present paper attempts to understand the prospects, significance and challenges of stakeholder engagement in public policy sphere of India. It intends to draw inference on the basis of document analysis as regards some of the current Indian government's development initiatives, like Swachh Bharat Abhiyan, Namami Gange Programme, Smart City Mission and assess the status of stakeholder engagement therein. The prerequisites of stakeholder engagement are many and complex calling for a continuum across the multiple stakeholders associated with a project in varying capacities and differing levels of engagement as per the authority or power they wield to influence decisions. Although the concept of stakeholder engagement is gaining increased acceptance and significance across various domains, there are yet no established normative frameworks and practices of the stakeholder engagement method courtesy the varying social, economic and political conditions across settings. Besides, being a direct human dimension, engagement of stakeholders is difficult to be quantitatively measured. Public policy demands a long-term, persistent and non-manipulative commitment on the part of the policy-makers and stakeholders to optimally reap the benefits of stakeholder engagement. Nonetheless, appropriate and effective stakeholder engagement in itself is not a guarantee to the success of a project or policy.

Keywords: Stakeholder engagement, Public policy, India, Issues and challenges, Development initiatives

1 INTRODUCTION

The terminology and approaches of Stakeholder and Stakeholder Engagement have gained much popularity primarily in the circles of business ethics, the field they originated from having been adopted by other fields like law, education, public policy, management, governance, and many more across both private and public sectors. In all these fields, the needs and aspirations of the 'stakeholders' are analysed and placed at the beginning before initiating any concrete action so as to arrive at a detailed plan to move ahead with.

Although, as put forth by Andrew Friedman and Samantha Miles in their work 'Stakeholder, Theory and Practice (2006)', there is no single and acceptable definition that can exhaustively and encompassingly describe the specific nature of what a 'Stakeholder' is, yet most simplistically and acceptably it has been defined by APM and Project Management Institute (PMI) as 'anyone that can affect or be affected by the achievement of the organization's objectives' (Freeman 1984). This, therefore, presumes that stakeholders invariably possess a relationship with the organization's objectives; as also, their 'stake' or 'vested interest' is, either directly or indirectly affected by the outcome of the set objectives. Thus, all those people or groups who in any way matter in the context are the stakeholders. When these stakeholders make themselves available, either directly or indirectly, through whatever they do towards the fate of the project is termed as their 'Engagement'. Now, this engagement can be of varied kinds and degrees ranging from consultancy, communication, influence, negotiation, providing approvals, reducing impediments, furnishing funds to what not.

Hence, 'Stakeholder Engagement' is a strategic and structured process by which an organization secures the involvement of the relevant stakeholders in the achievement of its objectives. These relevant stakeholders may be individuals or groups who are either affected by the decisions of the organization which involves them, or possess the ability to influence, positively or negatively, the implementation of these decisions (Jeffery 2009). Stakeholder engagement is, therefore, a two-way process that deals with the mutual relationships and influence of stakeholders, and is carried out in the form of continual interventions throughout the life-cycle of a project. It is an interactive, encouraging and inclusive process whereby efforts are made to effect changes in the entire decision-making process to match up with social needs through consultation, communication, negotiation, compromise and relationship building with the relevant stakeholders (Jeffery 2009). Thus, the process of stakeholder engagement is a dynamic blend of various activities like stakeholder identification, consultation, involvement, collaboration, preparation of action plan etc. wherein both the approach and frequency of such engagement varies with the nature and type of the stakeholders (Morris and Baddache 2012).

It is primarily Edward Freeman who is credited with the development of Stakeholder Theory in his book 'Strategic Management: A Stakeholder Approach (1984, 2010)' within the sphere of business and managerial ethics. Besides Freeman, there are several others having contributed to enriching and theorizing the concept including Donaldson and Preston (1995), Mitchell, Agle and Wood (1997), Friedman and Miles (2002), Phillips (2003), etc. However, since its promulgation, the theory has come a long way spawning as a subject of many spheres lying within both public and private domains including all kinds of governance beyond corporate governance, and public policy as well.

2. REVIEWING STAKEHOLDER ENGAGEMENT IN PUBLIC POLICY

Stakeholders cast far-reaching influence over decision-making and possess the power to affect the success or failure of a policy/developmental initiative. It is this that underlines the priority that should be assigned to the incorporation of stakeholders' needs and interests in the design of a policy, programme or project as well as engaging them at the execution level for enhancing the success ratio while other factors are presumably well taken care of. Thus, stakeholder approach has been adopted in public policy sphere in pursuance of the objective of inclusive growth and better assimilation of public expectations into policies. Further, stakeholder engagement approach is governed by the underlying principle that stakeholders possess the capacity and opportunity to influence the very decision-making process which is ultimately going to influence their lives. Hence, stakeholder engagement has been adopted as an ambitious tool in public policy process.

It is in tune with an effective policy development to investigate into a fundamental question of all the rationale behind why a stakeholder be interested to be involved in a policy/scheme in the form of related altruistic, return-on-investment and other preponderant benefits besides the feeling of compulsion on either side. It is also important to ponder on the essentiality of availability of adequate resources, informed decisions and partnership between various stakeholders in proportion to their respective competency level for the success and efficiency of a project as also on the respective roles of various stakeholders both as enabler and resistor according to their interests at stake (Griffiths *et al* 2008).

Essentiality of e-governance cannot be under-estimated to ensure better transparent and accountable governance system so as to secure multi-stakeholder synergy through improved and enhanced access to information in view of the imperative of empowering the stakeholders through the deployment of information and communication technology (ICT) towards increased participation and collaboration for better policy outcomes and public service delivery (Malhotra 2016, Verma *et al* 2008).

The concept of stakeholders in a process emanates from the principal-agent theory where 'agent' refers to the one who acts towards the fulfilment of the interests of others (principal) rather than of their own. Like any initiative, a public policy initiative also has a wide range of stakeholders holding different interests in the design and delivery of the same. Proper planning and communication are essential to progress with a meaningful and intense collaborative engagement in policy formulation as well as securing its better execution (Blanchard *et al* 2015). Although it has been vividly established and re-established that stakeholder involvement in policy making does cast an impact on the policy outcomes, but at the same time warns against over-estimating the same due to the role of various intervening surrounding factors like budgetary allocation, political support, etc. (Schalk, 2011). Suitable framework needs to be worked out as regards improved collaborative decision-making and execution on the basis of a flexible, adaptable, rigorous engagement process by following the simple objectives of clarity of purposes, systematic and fool proof representation of stakeholders, usage of optimally relevant methods for securing engagement and simultaneously creating opportunities for co-ownership in the project on the part of the stakeholders (Talley *et al* 2016).

There are certain principles and methodologies which need to be followed for ensuring a meaningful and effective stakeholder engagement in this context so as to optimally tap into stakeholders' expertise and experience towards sound policy development and its execution achieving desired results (Chan 2016). Due to the complex and dynamic nature of the stakeholder engagement's process, these principles keep evolving themselves; yet a few important ones can be enumerated thus (MacNicol *et al* 2014):

- Identification and involvement of the right people as stakeholders.
- Effective communication by identifying and using those methods of communication as preferred by people.
- Early and frequent consultation with stakeholders for not only procuring relevant information but also using the same so as to strengthen policy development and its progress.
- Adequate planning for stakeholder engagement as extensively and exhaustively as the technical dimensions of a policy process.
- Development of workable and sustaining relationships with the stakeholders.
- Customizing engagement approach as per different stakeholders and varying situations.
- Maintaining openness, transparency and clarity of purpose of engagement.
- Regular review and monitoring of stakeholder engagement throughout the policy process.
- Reconciliation of conflicting and diversified interests of policy planners and stakeholders.

Stakeholder engagement helps rule out the uncertainty attached to the fate of a policy by bringing the stakeholders and their problems within the frame as stakeholder engagement enhances the knowledge and support base required for a policy development. However, puts forth that the very process of engaging myriad stakeholders is very complex, challenging, less adaptive and hence less preferred as compared to expert-based policy in case of controversial issues rather than the regulatory ones. Stakeholder engagement, therefore, is indispensable for the sake of better governance across organizations (Bijlsma *et al* 2011). There exists a mutual relationship between the policy makers and the relevant stakeholders favouring the larger interest of the societal development through inclusive growth and an integrated governance approach (Arroyo 2013). Effective stakeholder engagement enhances participatory decision-making, builds social capital and strengthens the society at large in achieving the objectives of sustainable development. However, sustainability of a project can be achieved only if concerted and continuous dialogue-oriented approach is applied integrating the managerial, ethical and social learning perspectives together instead of a fragmented approach (Mathur *et al* 2008).

Public policies are the results of the interaction of social, cultural, economic and political settings of a specific problem coupled with government responses to these interactions. There is an array of people who serve as stakeholders of public policies – individuals, communities, social groups, pressure groups, political parties, industry groups, legislators, administrators, judiciary, media, NGOs, financial agencies and so on. These

stakeholders can be categorized into various types – internal or external, positive or negative, individuals or groups – in terms of their positioning vis-à-vis policy/project, their impact on the policy outcomes, and their number. Besides, another typology categorizes stakeholders on the basis of their link with the policy into Primary Stakeholders those possessing directly linked interests to the fate of policy (like employees, communities, investors, etc), and Secondary Stakeholders those affected indirectly or having indirect bearing on the results (like media, academia, competitors, political groups, etc). More diagnostically, stakeholders have been categorized on the basis of the attributes of perceived power, legitimacy and urgency. The typology, though, has been evolved with management perspective but applies well to public policy perspective too.

It is at each stage of policy process that policy planners and analysts need to decide on different aspects pertaining to involvement of stakeholders, like when, how and through what mechanism could they broker the relationship with the identified stakeholders. These stakeholders may be both powerful and powerless ones in terms of the influence they can cast on policy development. Thus, for the sake of a sound policy development, it is important that all stakeholders are considered irrespective of their power, knowledge, resourcefulness, etc during each stage of policy life-cycle from problem identification to evaluation of results. A variety of tools and techniques that are used by policy planners and analysts for the purpose of engaging stakeholders include both traditional consultation methods, newer communication technology and advanced simulation and modelling methods.

3. METHODOLOGY AND DISCUSSION

The present paper attempts to understand the prospects, significance and challenges of stakeholder engagement in public policy sphere of India. It intends to draw inference on the basis of document analysis as regards some of the current Indian government's development initiatives, like Swachh Bharat Abhiyan, Namami Gange Programme, Smart City Mission and assess the status of stakeholder engagement therein. The need for enhanced stakeholder engagement in context of Indian policy development has been firmly advocated, not only to legitimize decisions but also to establish better trust and understanding while recommending certain solutions towards bettering the mechanism of people's participation in context of a regulatory policy (Mlynarkiewicz 2013).

3.1. Swachchh Bharat Mission

It has been envisaged as a mass movement and was launched in October 2014 to create a clean, hygienic and healthy India by 2019. It possesses two components through which it covers both rural and urban areas marked by differences in their socio-cultural set-ups and hence the problems pertaining to the mission, therefore follows distinct guidelines for each. Its precursors Comprehensive Rural Sanitation Programme, Total Sanitation Campaign, Nirmal Bharat Abhiyan have eventually been culminated into a more comprehensive, people-centric and demand driven sanitation campaign calling for a necessary behavioural change and focusing on multi-stakeholder approach while exclusively focusing on citizen engagement.

Guidelines for Community Engagement under Swachchh Bharat Mission- Urban (SBM-U) have been issued by the Ministry of Housing and Urban Affairs, Government of India (GoI) in October 2017 wherein each dimension of SBM-U has been extensively dealt with. NITI Ayog's Report of the Sub-Group of Chief Ministers on SBM issued in 2015 acknowledged that the key difference between SBM and earlier programmes can be found in the efforts to attract partners to supplement public sector investment with a multi-stakeholder approach. Since sanitation is a multi-stakeholder, multi-agency and multi-stage activity so it is imperative to strengthen the institutional capacity of various stakeholders coupled with an assortment of technologies and management models so that adequate flexibility is in place to adopt whatever is appropriate. In a combined endeavour, Centre for Policy Research, New Delhi and Confederation of Indian Industry elaborately discuss the areas and scope for engagement of industrial sector in SBM. A successful sanitation drive of the nature of SBM is possible only if the scale and engagement model is attractive to all stakeholders concerned. Investments in the physical fabric of the nation need to be made in a way that promotes a shift to better hygienic, sustainable, socially acceptable and environmentally-benign behaviour on the part of all stakeholders as the success of the programme will depend on the confluence of multiple forces including adequate capacities of all the stakeholders involved, besides others. Mid-term evaluation of SBM by some leading voluntary organizations like Health-Hygiene and UK India Business Council recognize that only a collaborative, multi-stakeholder approach has the potential to transform India's health-hygiene scenario positively. However, in want of all stakeholders facilitated to incline their efforts in a coordinated and concerted manner, SBM's progress has remained skewed.

In context of stakeholder engagement in SBM, ownership is an important factor in transforming the people's mind-set into treating public goods and services as their own, taking pride in public cleaning instead of

treating it as a menial act specifically meant to be done by specific caste and gender, and becoming more health conscious.

3.2. Namami Gange

The Ganga is the world's most polluted river basin and houses India's half the population and some two-third of the country's poor. Namami Gange is the most recent and a very ambitious initiative towards rejuvenation of the Ganga river basin succeeding the past dismally delivering efforts like the Ganga Action Plans. The multiple tasks that are required to be undertaken within the ambit of the initiative include conceptualizing and developing a river basin model, analysing the water quality at various sites, assessing the environmental flow, understanding the socio-cultural value systems and more. All of which, to be optimally achieved, demand establishing an efficient and effective stakeholder engagement throughout the process.

Das and Tamminga (2012) have analysed the various governmental efforts made for cleaning Ganga and have favoured amplified stakeholder engagement across various levels, disciplines and strata over the experts-only approaches. Sinha (2014) identifies and analyses the stakeholders in the basin to achieve the goal of biodiversity and environment conservation in a multi-stakeholder scenario. Namami Gange has huge number of stakeholders ranging from every single citizen of the country, people living in the basin of the Ganga, pilgrims thronging the Ganga and religious institutions along the river, communities depending upon the river for their livelihoods, relevant local government bodies and central and state level governments to the sanitation workers, NGOs, civil society organisations (CSOs), interest groups, self-help groups (SHGs), corporate houses etc. Yes Bank's Report claims that though data regarding the institutional and financial allocations for Ganga basin management exist, however the data available is not adequate and there is hardly any coherent interaction between the institutions; as also, the existing financial mechanisms are not conducive for proper river basin management. Therefore, given the existing institutional framework no firm and effective decisions can take shape. It recommends a multidisciplinary and multi-stakeholder approach based robust decision-making process to address the issues related to river basin management which are an ecosystem in themselves characterised by heavily inter-linked activities and institutions. Further it adds that a more diffused and collaborative method is needed to providing sustainable solutions to the complex issues related to the scenario. WuXun *et al* (2017) analyse that the shortcomings identified at each stage of the policy cycle in context of the Ganga river basin rejuvenation initiatives extensively reflect upon a dismal scenario as regards stakeholder engagement, specifically citizens' engagement, at each stage and sub-stage of the cycle. The report recommends on making Namami Gange a people's program throughout, besides suitably engaging governments at different levels and other suitable stakeholders. Bharati *et al* (2016) portray that enormity and complexity of the choices pertaining to the conflicting interests of the stakeholders involved hitherto in cleaning Ganga have caused 'policy paralysis' and calls for a set of simplified and approachable choices based on the vital and effective knowledge sharing by both the formal and informal institutions possessing allegiance to the matter so as to ensure constructive and speedier stakeholder engagement relying upon increased awareness and informed decisions.

The Ganga rejuvenation has been termed as 'inherently wicked' problem by several government reports, documents and position papers given the wide diversity of stakeholder values and perspectives and the political and institutional dimensions that arise from distributed responsibilities across multiple jurisdictions and institutions. It has, therefore, been repetitively endorsed that technical work must be coupled with a well-structured stakeholder engagement and consultation process, supplied with appropriate governance arrangements to guide both the technical and consultation work. The technical analyses, engagement processes and governance arrangements have been commonly identified as the critical pillars of strategic basin planning and the need for multi-stakeholder approach and establishing a process to ensure stakeholder engagement has been earnestly talked about.

3.3. Smart City Mission

As projected by the approach of the Smart Cities Mission (SCM), the objective is to promote cities that provide core infrastructure and give a decent quality of life to its citizens, a clean and sustainable environment and application of 'Smart' Solutions. The focus of the mission is on sustainable and inclusive development and the idea is to look at compact areas, create a replicable model which will act like a light house to other aspiring cities. The Smart Cities Mission of the Government of India is an innovative, bold and new initiative meant to establish examples that can be replicated both within and outside the Smart City and acting as a catalyst to the creation of similar Smart Cities in various regions and parts of the country. The very purpose of the Smart Cities Mission is to drive economic growth and improve people's quality of life by enabling comprehensive development in the area and harnessing technology that provides smart solutions thereby leading to smart outcomes converting urban areas into inclusive cities. The Report on Citizen

Engagement in Smart Cities Mission (SCM) by the National Institute of Urban Affairs studies the role and significance of engaging citizens at all the three stages – self assessment (before), preparing a smart city plan (during) and implementation of the plan (after). Several government officials concerned, policy think tanks and legislators have termed multi-stakeholder participation as the key to the success of smart cities plan and advocate that with all stakeholders — government, industry, academia, civil society — working together in cooperative and coordinated manner these cities could be transformed in to smarter urban spaces, he said.

Therefore, several researches, reports, deliberations have not only acknowledged the significance but have preferred it over other methods to the extent of establishing and advocating the indispensability of stakeholder engagement as the key to the success of developmental initiatives like the ones discussed in the present paper.

4. ANALYSIS

It is now generally acknowledged that an appropriate and effective stakeholder engagement has the potential to enhance public opinion towards a public policy or any government initiative for that matter. Stakeholder management involves application of soft skills as it is more an art than science revolving around rapport building. It is, therefore, important not only to educate and create awareness among the shareholders, but also to impart training to policy planners and analysts so as to hone their skills towards deployment and execution of appropriate engagement techniques and methods. Well-researched and informed stakeholder mapping is a pre-requisite to successful stakeholder engagement and smart stakeholder management to rule out any irrelevant involvement and non-deliverable commitments whatsoever. In case of public delivery systems, people are the ultimate beneficiaries, therefore any laxity to the effect of their engagement may lead to disastrous consequences as regards a public policy. Stakeholder engagement approach is competent enough to take care of this in Indian context.

As compared to all other dimensions of a policy process including cost-effectiveness, implementation, auditing, monitoring, etc., analysis of stakeholder engagement, being a direct human dimension, is inevitably the most difficult to be quantitatively measured. Largely, stakeholders themselves do not absolutely know their own mind, and therefore, stakeholder analysis is a dicey affair wherein policy planners can at the best optimise their information about their stakeholders.

There is not enough study on the stakeholder engagement approach across public policy domain to suit the multifaceted requirements of the domain, and the approach needs to be researched and developed more accordingly. Quite importantly, in India, engagement of stakeholders in context of government policies, projects and programmes has not yet gained enough ground despite mentioning that the policies within the new governance paradigm are to be based on multi-stakeholder approach. Besides, the approach is largely laden with managerial perspective alone and does not conform to the extended and increased demands of public policy sphere. The most prevalent practices, as witnessed in the country, are largely in the form of public-private partnership (PPP) model with restricted involvement and fragmented approach towards inclusive growth in terms of people's participation.

Engagement of stakeholders tends to be a failed or less successful exercise in want of an adequate feedback and follow-up mechanisms in place. Appropriate and effective stakeholder engagement in itself is not a guarantee for the success of a project/policy, but is definitely necessary to provide sustained support to all government initiatives in the form of stakeholder confidence and benefits of stakeholders' differentiated but cumulative capacities. Government agencies initiating a social intervention need to allow adequate time and provide sufficient support to the stakeholders and deal with them in such a flexible manner with different stakeholders as the situation warrants to muster a conducive, productive and meaningful relationship.

Government initiatives towards the development of society demand a long-term, persistent and non-manipulative commitment on the part of authorities and stakeholders both so as to optimally reap the benefits of stakeholder engagement. India is a large country with huge and diversified population, therefore, effective engagement of stakeholders requires adequate infrastructure, state-of-art technology and efficient resource mobilization to supplement skilled human efforts towards achieving developmental goals. Nonetheless, the modern day stakeholder engagement is not only about establishing a direct dialogue with the stakeholders using the state-of-art technology, digital and online platforms but also about establishing productive, progressive and meaningful collaborations with them.

4.1 Challenges

India being a developing economy is faced with its own share of socio-economic problems further accentuating the challenges that are posed before public policy planners in ensuring effective stakeholder

engagement, as are discussed hereunder:

- Lack of conducive political will and facilitating social, economic and political environment.
- Rampant corruption and malpractices marring the government and administrative machinery.
- Relationship building with apathetic citizenry who is confronted with multiple socio-economic problems.
- Lack of knowledge due to unsatisfactory education level and lack of general awareness among a large section of the society.
- Overload of mundane tasks over the professionals leaves them with little interest and time at their disposal.
- Ineffective convergence of schemes lacking true integrated approach towards the fulfilment of the basic needs of people.
- Failing leadership and narrow public support due to mismatch between government policies and implementation as well as prevalent practices of nepotism and favouritism within the government framework.
- Bringing about behavioural changes in the people besides establishing adequate infrastructure and providing logistical support to them.
- Trust-deficit towards government initiatives courtesy vested interests and vote bank politics.
- Inadequate representation of stakeholders by the organization(s) that claims to be or is considered to be representing the voices.

Mushrooming associations or organizations in the garb of representing people's interests thereby making the process of stakeholder engagement even more cumbersome.

5. CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTIONS

There is no doubting the fact that stakeholder engagement strengthens a policy process and accentuates development initiatives of government. Engaging stakeholders in the development process not only helps in reducing the trust deficit on either side but also lessens the burden on government machinery due to participation in, collaboration with and co-ownership of the government initiated projects. In policy process, stakeholder engagement approach, on the basis of in-depth and extensive analysis incurred, permits a holistic understanding of the organizational circumstances to work out a plan of action accordingly, and ensures a certainty of outcome thus saving the diversion and distraction of resources. Moreover, this approach streamlines policy/programme development process and paves the success path of the policy/programme by making it more robust and resilient. It is due to its far-reaching impact that stakeholder engagement approach has outgrown itself from the clout of corporate social responsibility (CSR) activity primarily limited to the assessment of environmental impacts of business projects to an all-pervasive approach in the times of new governance paradigm dealing with the cause of public welfare sustainably through a multi-stakeholder approach.

In a democratic set up, it is the stakeholders of a development initiative which provide legitimacy to it and without their quintessential support the initiative would fail to see the light of the day, more so in the times of globalization when competing goods and service providers are available. Satisfied and happy stakeholders always enhance the goodwill of an organization and its initiatives, and public policy domain behaves the same way. The stakeholders' word-of-mouth is probably the best and most emphatic report card of an organization irrespective of the other criteria used to evaluate and exhibit the organization's success. Nonetheless, drawing a consensus amongst all the related stakeholders as also aligning their interests with those of the policy planners and further involving them in the policy process is a much difficult task. The idea, therefore, is to optimally consolidate this engagement instead of securing absolute consensus and establish a healthy stakeholder ecosystem for this in the larger interest of the society.

The present paper puts forth a few suggestions as regards ensuring a better and more effective stakeholder engagement in Indian public policy context:

- A clear, transparent and uniform guiding policy for stakeholder engagement possessing a fair degree of predictability be developed by government.
- Politicians, policy planners and administrators should exhibit strong leadership quality and commitment to the objectives of stakeholder engagement by rising above their vested interests.

- Administrators and other public officials should be adequately trained to enhance their skills and capacities to conduct effective stakeholder engagement.
- A legal framework should be developed and established by government to ensure adherence to the principles of effective stakeholder engagement.
- Government should plan and act strategically to tap optimal benefits of stakeholder engagement for giving better policies and programmes to the society yielding desired results.
- Better engagement of marginalized and vulnerable sections should be ensured through development of proper mechanism.
- Clear and practical timelines should be set and publicized for engagement activities allowing sufficient time to the stakeholders to submit their ideas and opinions.
- Proper platform and suitable mediums should be made available to the stakeholders to register their opinions.
- Appropriate tools should be employed for the purpose of each stage of engagement, especially for consultation.
- Consultation should be kept focused, non-repetitive, crisp and easily comprehensible to avoid any gaps in gathering information and reporting.
- Legitimacy of the entire process of policies, programmes or projects should be improved by invoking better transparency and making them consistent with the Indian society's existing values and norms. This would help policy planners reduce trust deficit and enhance relationship building vis-à-vis stakeholders to achieve the objectives of a policy or programme.

Behavioural patterns prevalent in the society towards a policy issue should be sensitively and strategically dealt with by the policy planners to successfully enforce the intended changes.

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