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From Theory to Action: Bridging Governance Gaps in Public Policy for Sustainable Development

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Abstract

Public policy addresses societal challenges, shapes governance structures, and enhances institutional performance. This paper critically reviews the stages of the policy process—formulation, implementation, and evaluation—by examining key theoretical frameworks, including the policy cycle, rational and incremental models, and evidence-based policy-making. While these frameworks offer valuable foundational insights, their practical application is often constrained by complex political, institutional, and socio-cultural factors. The analysis underscores how real-world governance dynamics frequently demand adaptive and participatory approaches that extend beyond the linear logic of conventional policy models. Drawing on a qualitative literature review, the study emphasises the growing relevance of Sustainable Development Goal 16 (Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions) as a normative foundation for effective governance. SDG 16 advocates inclusive institutions, accountable decision-making, and equitable access to justice—principles closely aligned with effective public policy. By integrating governance-oriented considerations such as transparency, stakeholder engagement, and institutional resilience, the paper argues for a more flexible and context-sensitive approach to policy-making. The findings suggest that bridging the gap between theory and practice requires methodological pluralism and a commitment to institutional values consistent with the spirit of SDG 16. This article contributes to a deeper understanding of how public policy can strengthen democratic governance in an era of uncertainty and complexity.

Keywords: *Evidence-Based Policy-Making; Governance Gaps; Policy Processes*

Introduction

Public policy stands as a foundational element for governments aiming to address a myriad of social challenges effectively, allocate resources thoughtfully and equitably, and oversee the economic and social activities that shape our communities. The processes involved in public policy become progressively complex as governance structures adapt and evolve, responding to the shifting needs and dynamics of society (Janssen & van der Voort, 2016). These complexities require a keen understanding of stakeholder interests, the influence of political contexts, and the necessity for collaboration among various entities to craft policies that are not only effective but also equitable and sustainable.

To navigate these complexities, scholars and practitioners have developed various theoretical models to elucidate the processes involved in public policy. Among these, the policy cycle model provides a comprehensive framework that outlines the stages of policy development, from agenda setting and formulation to implementation, evaluation, and potential revision (Knoepfel et al., 2007). The rational model posits that policymakers make decisions based on systematically analysing problems and solutions, emphasising the importance of evidence and logical reasoning in decision-making (Dye, 2017). Conversely, the incremental model suggests that policy changes occur gradually and often through minor adjustments rather than sweeping reforms, reflecting the realities of political negotiation and compromise (Lindblom, 2018). The evidence-based approach also underscores the necessity of utilising empirical data and research findings to inform policy decisions, advocating for a more scientific basis in developing effective public policies (Cairney, 2016).

While these models provide valuable theoretical frameworks that enhance our understanding of the public policy landscape, their practical application frequently encounter significant challenges. Political pressures can skew policy-making, as elected officials may prioritise short-term political gains over long-term societal benefits (Ogami, 2024). Institutional constraints, such as bureaucratic inertia and limited resources, can hinder the implementation of well-intentioned policies (Andina-Díaz et al., 2023). Furthermore, public opinion plays a critical role in shaping policy outcomes, as policymakers often feel compelled to respond to the sentiments and demands of their constituents, which can lead to reactive rather than proactive policy measures (Wlezien & Soroka, 2016). Finally, the influence of global factors, including international agreements, economic interdependencies, and transnational issues such as climate change, adds another layer of complexity to public policy, necessitating a more nuanced approach to governance (Lodhi, 2021). To address these challenges, policymakers must adopt a more holistic and adaptive approach, incorporating diverse perspectives and stakeholder input throughout the policy process.

Effective public policy must be adaptable, considering various factors influencing decision-making and implementation processes (Bizikova et al., 2018; Capano & Lepori, 2024). This adaptability is essential for addressing society's evolving challenges, ensuring that policies remain relevant and effective in achieving desired outcomes. To achieve this,

policymakers must continuously learn and collaborate with stakeholders, ensuring that evidence-based practices are effectively integrated into the policy cycle (Hinrichs-Krapels et al., 2020; Khomsi et al., 2024). This ongoing collaboration is crucial for fostering innovative solutions that effectively address the multifaceted challenges inherent in public policy implementation.

Table 1. Key Challenges in Public Policy Governance Related to SDG 16
Source: Processed by the authors (2024)

Challenges	Description	Relevant SDG 16 Target
Corruption and Bribery	High Levels of Corruption Hinder Policy Effectiveness and Erode Public Trust	16.5
Institutional Capacity Constraints	Limited Resources and Institutional Capacity in Government Agencies Obstruct the Effective Implementation of Policies	16.6
Low Public Participation	Minimal Public Engagement in Decision-Making Processes Reduces the Legitimacy and Effectiveness of Public Policy	16.7
Limited Access to Information	Lack of Transparency and Limited Public Access to Information Undermine Accountability and Public Participation in Governance Processes	16.10

The global agenda, including the Sustainable Development Goals, particularly Goal 16, emphasises the importance of inclusive and participatory governance, which is crucial for enhancing the effectiveness of public policy implementation (Massey, 2022). This necessitates a commitment to fostering collaboration among diverse stakeholders, improving transparency, and ensuring accountability within governance structures to achieve meaningful progress in policy outcomes (Hermansyah et al., 2024). Achieving these goals requires a shift in policy frameworks and a cultural transformation within institutions to embrace transparency and active public engagement.

The close link between this study and SDG 16 lies in the SDG's focus on strengthening good governance through building effective, accountable, and inclusive institutions. In the context of public policy, these principles serve as an essential foundation for realising a policy formulation and implementation process responsive to the community's needs. Table 1 explains the key challenges in public policy governance related to SDG 16.

Specific targets of SDG 16 relevant to this study include Target 16.5, which emphasises the substantial reduction of all forms of corruption and bribery, as these practices can undermine policy legitimacy and public trust. Furthermore, Target 16.6 calls for developing effective, accountable and transparent institutions at all levels, a critical element in ensuring that public policies are implemented efficiently and responsibly. Target 16.7 emphasises the importance of responsive, inclusive, participatory and representative decision-making—dimensions of primary concern in promoting public participation in the policy process. Finally, Target 16.10 emphasises the need to ensure public access to information and protect fundamental freedoms, which are crucial in creating open and democratic governance. Therefore, integrating SDG 16 principles in public policy analysis is theoretically relevant and strategic in improving the quality of governance and the success of policy implementation in various contexts.

This study aims to conduct a thorough and critical examination of key policy models implemented in modern governance. It specifically explores the alignment of various policy formulation, implementation, and evaluation models—such as the policy cycle, rational and incremental models, top-down and bottom-up strategies, and evidence-based policy-making—with the primary objectives of SDG 16, especially regarding accountability, transparency, and citizen involvement. The main research question driving this study is: how do contemporary public policy processes facilitate or obstruct the realisation of SDG 16 goals related to accountable, transparent, and inclusive governance? The outcomes intend to offer insights into how adaptable policy frameworks can be better synchronised with SDG 16 to encourage inclusive, participatory, and effective governance outcomes.

Research Methods

This research utilises a qualitative traditional literature review method to thoroughly analyse the theoretical underpinnings and practical implementations of public policy models. Opting for a qualitative literature review enables a comprehensive investigation and integration of theoretical constructs and empirical evidence from diverse scholarly resources (Snyder, 2019). This method aligns well with the study's objective to reveal intricate challenges and processes in policy and governance that quantitative data alone cannot fully represent.

The analysis centres on scholarly books and peer-reviewed journal articles addressing the policy cycle, rational and incremental models, and evidence-based policy-making. A literature review was conducted using a convenient academic database, such as Google Scholar. It is acknowledged that Google Scholar is very effective, user-friendly, and might serve as the preferred option for systematic reviews or meta-analysis (Boeker et al., 2013). The selection criteria prioritise literature that discusses the convergence between policy theory and practice within contemporary governance. Moreover, this review aims to identify the connections between existing policy frameworks and the principles of SDG 16, to pinpoint ways to enhance the effectiveness of governance. By examining these connections, the study aims to improve our understanding of how policy

frameworks can be adapted to support the objectives of peace, justice, and strong institutions more effectively.

Figure 1 presents a detailed visual representation of the careful, step-by-step process followed during the qualitative literature review for this study. It outlines the different stages involved, including the thoughtful selection of relevant sources, the systematic thematic coding of the collected data, the synthesis of findings, and the insightful interpretation of the results.

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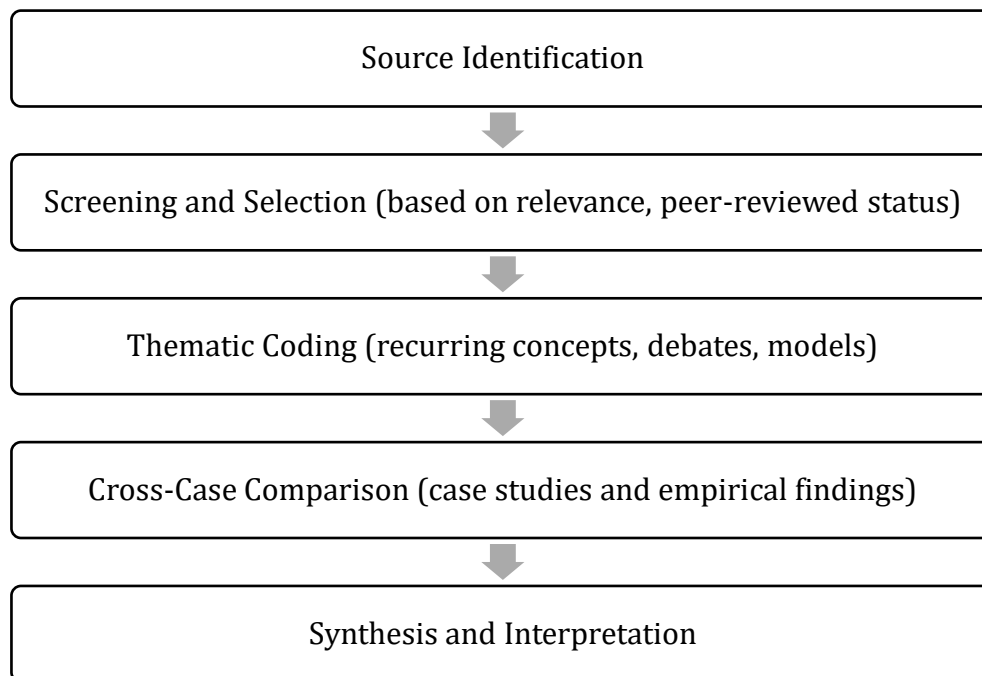
Figure 1. Qualitative Literature Review Process
Source: Processed by the authors (2025)

The process begins with source identification, where relevant books and peer-reviewed journal articles are gathered based on their focus on public policy models and governance. This is followed by a screening and selection stage, which ensures that only high-quality, thematically relevant, and peer-reviewed sources are included in the analysis. Once selected, these sources undergo thematic coding, systematically categorising key concepts, theoretical debates, and practical insights. The thematic analysis process adheres to the following steps: becoming familiar with the data, generating initial codes, identifying themes, reviewing those themes, defining and naming them, and finally compiling the report (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Furthermore, the next step involves conducting a cross-case comparison, drawing on empirical studies and case examples to highlight the gap between theoretical models and real-world policy implementation. Finally, the findings are synthesised and interpreted to develop an integrated understanding of how public policy theories influence governance outcomes. This structured approach ensures analytical depth and coherence in the review process.

Although this approach is constrained by its reliance on pre-existing literature and the lack of original field data, the implementation of clear and transparent selection criteria, along with a systematic coding process, significantly bolsters the credibility and reproducibility of the research findings. This methodological rigour ensures that the study's conclusions are well-founded and can be reliably replicated in future investigations.

Results and Discussion

Critical Review of Policy Process Stages

The policy-making process encompasses a range of activities, stages, and diverse options while factoring in various elements of the policy landscape. These considerations pertain to the distribution of resources: who receives what, when, and in what manner. Dye (2017) noted that public policy formulated by the government also assigns values to society since every policy embodies a specific set of values. Thus, any policy development that intersects with the public interest is inherently complex. As a result, policy-making will invariably involve the public. With the increasing prevalence of globalisation, international entities cannot be overlooked as a crucial component of public policy, even in matters primarily domestic.

From a democratic standpoint, the success of public policy implementation relies on public support, which can be garnered through various methods such as hearings, public consultations, focus groups, and similar approaches (Bobbio, 2019). Disseminating public information is crucial because policymakers often face limitations in addressing public concerns (Widayat et al., 2023). Furthermore, it can be inferred that greater public engagement in policy development fosters a stronger sense of ownership and support for policies that facilitate the application and enforcement of practical measures (Muluk et al., 2025). Engaging stakeholders and conducting public consultations are crucial for enhancing transparency, fostering public trust, and mitigating implementation risks (Häberlein & Hövel, 2023; Kujala et al., 2022). The analyst's role is to ensure that the formulated policies effectively address public issues. In essence, public policy aims to serve the broader public interest, rather than merely protecting the interests of policymakers or specific groups.

When addressing public challenges, the government must prioritise its selection process judiciously. Public policy represents an official statement from the government regarding the optimal choice among various alternative methods for addressing public issues. Naturally, the government must possess adequate capacity to adapt to environmental changes. In this context, the significance of public policy and the role of public policymakers become crucial. Public policy concentrates on the public and its challenges (Dewey, 2012). Consequently, public policy emerges as a response to public issues that arise, making the ability of policymakers to address these challenges a focal point in public policy.

From the implementation perspective, Mazmanian and Sabatier (1983) identified two viewpoints in implementation analysis: the context of public administration and the political science perspective. In public administration, implementation was initially seen as the competent and effective execution of policies. However, public administration agents often face influences from official mandates, interest groups, legislators, and various political factors. The perspective from political science supports a systems approach to politics, which seeks to move beyond an organisational focus in public administration and highlights the importance of external influences, such as administrative regulations, changing public preferences, new technologies, and community needs. To gauge the effectiveness of policy implementation, one should evaluate the program's output against the established policy objectives. The results of a program are evident in its impact on its target audience, including individuals, groups, and communities. Outcomes reflect changes in policy implementation and the extent to which the target demographic accepts these changes.

This article aims to clarify and assess the theories and tools involved in the public policy process, including formulation (policy cycle, rational and incremental models), implementation (top-down and bottom-up approaches), and evaluation (evidence-based policy-making). The concept of 'process' refers to a series of steps taken to achieve a goal, which is also true for the policy-making process. Policymakers must traverse a sequence of stages within the system to determine which policy will be enacted.

Policy Formulation

Identifying emerging issues is crucial in formulating policy, as it enables policymakers to determine which tools to utilise. Community problems can arise in various forms. Sometimes, issues can be predicted through research, such as the quality of education and skill development (Ehsan, 2021). In contrast, unexpected problems can occur suddenly, such as during a natural disaster. Regardless of whether government challenges are anticipated or not, their significance lies in becoming a matter of public and private concern. This will advance the issue into the agenda-setting phase.

The policy-making process is a political agenda-setting process. Birkland (2019) noted that several factors facilitate a problem's ascent on the agenda, including the nature of the problem itself, the participants involved, institutional dynamics, and other influential socio-political elements. However, it is essential to understand that not all matters can be included on the agenda; each issue must compete for policymakers' attention and enter the agenda-setting process (Dearing & Rogers, 1996). This competition is beneficial for sifting through issues because it would be challenging for policymakers to address every problem. Through this approach, they can prioritise the most pressing issues to tackle.

Once the issue is on the policymakers' agenda, the next step is to explore alternatives that could be developed into policy. As Terry (1977) noted, decision-makers must select one option from two or more available alternatives to establish the direction of the objectives. This is supported by Koontz and O'Donnell (1972), who indicated that the selection of other options is a critical aspect of the decision-making process in

planning. Among the numerous alternatives, there is inevitably one aligned with a predetermined plan, making it challenging for policymakers to make the best choice that can be formulated into a policy and enacted as legislation.

After deciding on one of the alternative policies to address the problem, the subsequent step is to translate the alternative into a policy. Policy formulation represents a pivotal stage in the policy-making process, as it directly affects the following stages of implementation and evaluation. The inability of a policy to achieve its goals frequently arises from deficiencies in the approach that policymakers take during the formulation phase, where they try to address issues without thoroughly exploring or analysing the root causes of the problems and recognising the potential impacts of different policy options (Leong & Howlett, 2022). Effective policy formulation must therefore consider comprehensive analyses of the possible effects, stakeholder perspectives, and the socio-political context to enhance successful implementation and evaluation.

Policies can either be created as programs or as legislation that possesses enforceable legal authority. Once the policy is established, the government must communicate the policy to stakeholders for effective implementation. The policy then undergoes an evaluation phase, where feedback collected is used to guide the process, potentially leading to revisions and a re-launch. Therefore, this evaluation phase acts as a metric for assessing the policy's effectiveness and is a key element of the policy framework. During the evaluation process, the government considers whether the policy's outcomes and impacts are appropriately aligned to address the identified issue. If the policy proves effective, it can proceed without necessitating a new agenda-setting process; however, if it falls short, modifications and new policies will arise through the policy cycle. Figure 2 outlines the policy-making process.
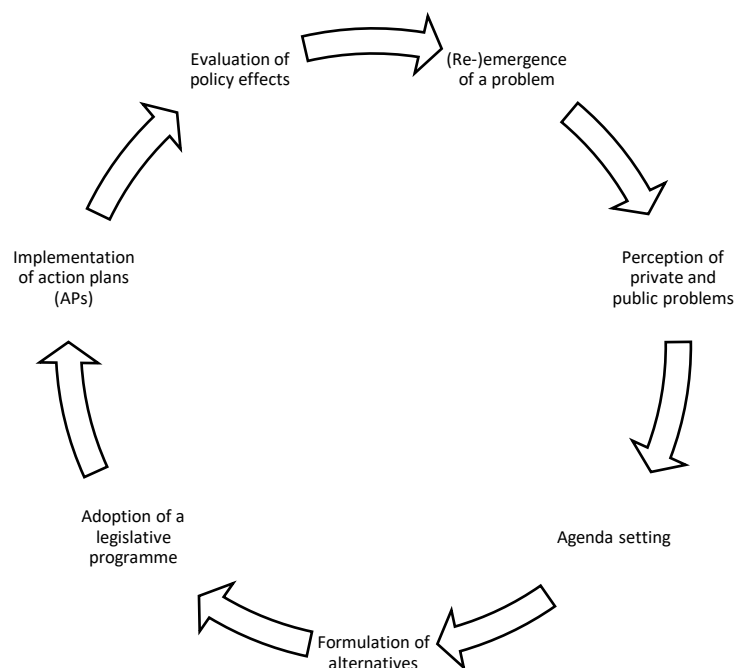

Figure 2. The Policy Cycle
Source: Recreated from Knoepfel et al. (2007)

The policy cycle outlined by Knoepfel et al. (2007) is a textbook representation of the policy process that resembles models proposed by other scholars, such as Anderson (2015) and Jones (1977). This model has faced criticism, notably from Nakamura (1987), who contended that the sequential-cumulative approach fails to accurately depict the actual workings of the policy process. Transitions from one stage to another could be hindered, as policy ideas frequently reach the agenda, but not all progress beyond that point. Moreover, implementation and evaluation are interconnected and cannot be separated, as evaluation occurs continuously throughout the policy's implementation.

The policy cycle provides a comprehensive step-by-step outline of the policy process. Therefore, it is academically regarded as the best option. In contrast, the actual scenario reveals complexities; the policy-making process is consistently affected by numerous external factors, such as conflicting political interests that may alter the policy path. While the policy cycle is theoretically sound, its real-world application can be constrained. There is no singular best model; each has its strengths and weaknesses, and scholars must devise improved methodologies, as demonstrated by Cohen et al. (1972) and Etzioni (1967). Additionally, scrutiny of policymakers should encourage them to be more diligent in their responsibilities.

The model for policy-making is crucial for helping policymakers develop effective policies. Dye (2017) contended that the process model is invaluable in aiding our comprehension of the various tasks involved in policy formulation. Numerous models are examined in the field of public policy. Nevertheless, this essay focuses on two specific models: rational and incremental. Scholars cannot assert that one model is superior to others. However, the rational-comprehensive theory is the most recognised among decision-makers (Anderson, 2015). Rational theory refers to the application of economic principles, whereby the actions of individuals motivated by self-interest can influence the policy process (Hill & Varone, 2014). Dye (2017) also posited that this model seeks to achieve 'the maximum social gain'. Essentially, this model aims to integrate a business perspective, including rational calculations of costs and benefits, into the public sector. By doing so, policies implemented by the government based on this principle can yield the most significant benefits for society.

According to Dye (2017), policymakers must comprehend five key factors before choosing a rational policy: (i) understanding all community aspirations and the importance of meeting these needs, (ii) recognising the available alternative policies, (iii) assessing potential consequences from each alternative, (iv) analysing the costs and benefits of each option, and (v) selecting the most effective and efficient alternative policies. By prioritising the public, the rational model carefully assesses all elements to develop policies that benefit the community.

Nonetheless, the rational model has its drawbacks. Simply understanding the public's preferences is not enough; policymakers also need to comprehend the circumstances that affect the public. In essence, they must skillfully choose issues that resonate with a broad audience while ensuring minority groups are not overlooked. Each issue has a potential solution; various alternatives imply that resolutions might be achievable with relative ease. However, this could complicate the decision-making

process for policymakers as they assess the advantages of each option, particularly when the options are similar; this may result in difficult decisions. Consequently, policymakers might need significant time to identify the best course of action, which can lead to community anxiety and impatience during the wait. Additionally, this may raise concerns about the government's responsiveness to these issues. As a result, the government's credibility may erode the public's perception.

Critiques of the rational model emphasise the difficulties that rational actors encounter when utilising it, even though some argue that alternative models may lead to more stringent policies. Nonetheless, logical reasoning is crucial for achieving public goals. Policymakers face a diverse electorate, each with its unique customs and beliefs; thus, they need to communicate their objectives to the public in a way that is supported by logical, relevant, and comparable evidence and references. As more people progress, the demand for governmental transparency has grown. Thus, the rational model continues to hold significant importance.

Considering a rational model intertwined with critique, Lindblom (2018) presents a differing strategy that he claims surpasses the rational model, particularly the incrementalism model. He maintains that not every existing policy proposal will be assessed by decision-makers in the following year. As the social fabric of society transforms, policies once considered ineffective might prove beneficial over time. By analysing the advantages and disadvantages of the proposed policy, policymakers can rearrange their priorities to identify the most effective policy. Unfortunately, they encounter constraints stemming from both technical (such as time, finances, and data) and non-technical (political) factors that obscure their ability to recognise the strengths and weaknesses of alternative policies.

When applied to public policy, incrementalism perpetuates the initiatives of the preceding administration while implementing a series of modifications and additional regulations as adjustments and improvements. This model also acknowledges the practical essence of policy as 'rational-comprehensive' and introduces a more traditional decision-making process (Dye, 2016). Numerous political factors affect incremental models. Decisions can be made with minimal adjustments, such as modifying the budget. However, if policymakers seek to change the policy completely, stakeholders may face significant conflict. Many parties are reluctant to make these changes, believing they could introduce uncertainty, with no guarantee that the alteration will produce a better result; instead, they worry it could worsen the situation. Therefore, a cautious approach is favoured if the program can continue to function. Political discord that complicates the shift to new policies may lead policymakers to keep existing policies unchanged. Hence, it is essential to manage the conflicts caused by incrementalism, as this model can maintain stability and support the political system. However, the incremental model is likely to struggle during times of crisis.

Given the shortcomings of rational and incremental models, various social science scholars are developing new methodologies to address the deficiencies of these two approaches. Etzioni (1967) introduced a mixed scanning model aimed at reconciling the diverse weaknesses of both models by integrating features characteristic of both rational

and incremental models. Moreover, Cohen et al. (1972) proposed a garbage can model that rejects the application of rationality in decision-making while remaining confined to incremental models.

Policy Implementation

When the policy is developed, it should be executed, and, as much as possible, the outcomes should align with policymakers' expectations (Nakamura & Smallwood, 1980). Edwards III (1980) asserted that policymakers' decisions cannot be effectively executed without successful implementation. The implementation of the policy encompasses legal actions that involve efforts to manage inputs to produce outputs for the community. Grindle (2017) noted that a new execution process will commence once the activity program is organised appropriately, the finances are prepared for distribution, and the goals and objectives for the program's success are established. The implementation of policies connects policy objectives to their realisation through the outcomes of governmental actions. This aligns with the perspective of Van Meter and Horn (Grindle, 2017), who suggest that the responsibility of implementation is to create a network that enables public policy objectives to be achieved through the actions of government agencies, involving various stakeholders.

Grindle (2017) depicts the implementation model as a combination of political and administrative processes. This model illustrates the decision-making process engaging various actors, with outcomes ultimately shaped by either resources or programs resulting from the interactions among decision-makers in administrative politics. The political aspect is reflected in the decision-making process, which involves multiple policy actors. In contrast, the administrative aspect is apparent through the comprehensive procedures of administrative actions, which can be examined at the specific program level.

According to Sabatier (1986), two competing models exist during the policy implementation phase: the top-down and bottom-up models. Both models are present in every decision-making process. The top-down model represents the approach sought in policy design and implementation to connect the highest and lowest levels (Birkland, 2019). In the top-down model, the implementer creates the proper structure and controls to encourage compliance and address issues as they arise. However, this method has a notable drawback. The primary challenges of the top-down model lie in its emphasis on specific goals. Moreover, evaluating success or failure becomes problematic without a common understanding. Additionally, the lack of consistent direction makes program implementation more difficult, particularly when policymakers and agencies pursue differing objectives.

In contrast, bottom-up models offer a mechanism for progressing from street-level bureaucrats (the bottom) to the highest decision-making (the top) in either the public or private sector. In this scenario, policy is formed through negotiations (whether explicit or implicit) among organisation members and their clients (Birkland, 2019). Nevertheless, the Bottom-Up approach has its limitations, especially regarding the assumption that implementation happens within a decentralised decision-making

framework. This can cause the approach to erroneously treat practical challenges as a normative claim or the sole basis for assessing complex organisational and political matters. Additionally, field officers are not infallible. It is risky to accept descriptive field observations without question, presuming that bureaucrats formulate policies and translate them into account of their actions.

Policy Evaluation

Data is essential in policy analysis, transforming into information that forms the basis for informed decisions (Buttow, 2025). This information can encompass both numerical data and textual descriptions, including narratives and conditions. To obtain this information, a policy analyst needs to conduct comprehensive research. In this context, research involves identifying data requirements and devising strategies for gathering necessary information. The collected data will then be analysed to provide analysts with a deeper understanding of the public's issues.

Given the significance of data in policy analysis, experts have introduced the concept of Evidence-Based Policy; however, the media often misuses the term to suggest that policymakers act without relying on evidence, which is misleading (Cairney, 2016). This method ensures that policy analysts have sufficient data to aid decision-making, achieve policy goals, and support implementation. Before the introduction of evidence-based policy, public policy was primarily shaped by the intuitions or judgments of policymakers regarding solutions to public issues. As a result, when data is utilised in policy analysis, it frequently lacks depth or confirms policymakers' opinions.

According to Nutley and Webb (2000), the government pursues research to support policy formation for multiple reasons, including: (i) problem-solving models; (ii) enlightenment models; (iii) tactical models; and (iv) political models. Problem-solving and enlightenment models utilise data to define policy issues and alternatives clearly. On the other hand, tactical and political models primarily utilise research data to reinforce existing governmental political positions. Often, available data is used to justify delaying or avoiding decisions that could negatively affect the government's political standing.

Evidence-based policy represents a crucial advancement in enhancing the quality of policy creation. However, policy analysts must understand the limitations associated with evidence-based policy and be prepared for these obstacles. First, data is used to substantiate research findings. It's essential to acknowledge that research may not always accurately reflect the complexities of people's lives. Much research is case-specific, concentrating on regions or events, which means the conclusions from these studies have limited relevance. Thus, policy analysts should be cautious when applying data or insights from case study research. Second, a public policy analyst needs to regard the government's true intentions behind using research findings in the policy-making process, questioning whether there is a genuine commitment to incorporating research data into policy development.

Shifting from opinion-driven to evidence-based policy-making, with a focus on data collection and research, is crucial for developing high-quality policies. As a result, successful public policy emerges from the integration of various elements, such as

process models, frameworks for policy implementation, evidence-based strategies, and other pertinent direct and indirect factors. To summarise, public policy revolves around the practical definition and organisation of issues and public concerns for inclusion in the policy agenda. Therefore, theories and models play a vital role in aiding decision-makers to utilise research in collecting diverse data and converting it into information relevant to policy. This methodology streamlines the formulation and selection of a range of policy options designed to tackle policy challenges and is highly recommended for policymakers.

Critical Analysis of SDG 16 in the Context of Policy Process

SDG 16 signifies a critical change in global development, highlighting good governance as vital for reaching other development goals. It emphasises the need for practical, accountable, inclusive, and transparent institutions. SDG 16 addresses key issues in public policy, including reducing corruption (Target 16.5), strengthening institutions (Target 16.6), promoting participatory decision-making (Target 16.7), and ensuring access to information and fundamental freedoms (Target 16.10). The establishment of SDG 16 highlights the crucial need for robust governance frameworks that prioritise transparency and public engagement in policy-making and implementation.

In public policy, the success of SDG 16 relies not just on the policy's content but also on its formulation, implementation, and evaluation. Each phase of the policy cycle highlights a governance aspect that requires thorough analysis to evaluate how effectively the principles of SDG 16 are being implemented. This careful analysis shows that effectively realising SDG 16 necessitates a structured approach, incorporating governance principles throughout all phases of the public policy cycle.

Although normatively, SDG 16 has been adopted as a global commitment to fostering good governance, its implementation at the national and local levels still faces various systemic and structural challenges (Hope Sr, 2020; Milton, 2021; Milton & Alhamawi, 2024; Razafindrakoto & Roubaud, 2018). These challenges not only obstruct the attainment of SDG 16 targets but also expose fundamental issues within the public policy framework. Typically, this challenge arises from the disparity between optimal policy design and actual governance practices, particularly in Global South nations. This disparity is exacerbated when policies aimed at fortifying institutions fail to shield them from deterioration due to the short-sighted interests of political actors.

The challenges in public policy governance aimed at achieving SDG 16 are intertwined with the complexities present at each phase of the policy process, including formulation, implementation, and evaluation. As previously highlighted in a critical review of these stages, a notable gap exists between the normative design of policy and its actual implementation in practice. This gap poses a structural barrier to fulfilling the goals of SDG 16, which requires effective, transparent, and accountable institutions that ensure participation and fairness for all stakeholders. Effective governance hinges not only on formal structures, such as laws and regulations, but also on the ethical conduct of individuals working within these frameworks (Sarnthoy, 2019). For example, ethical

management and a robust ethical culture are crucial in promoting adherence to the rule of law, thereby nurturing a system of checks and balances that is vital for achieving peace and justice, two core pillars of SDG 16.

In the formulation phase, one of the biggest challenges is the weak integration between a linear and ideal policy cycle approach with a more dynamic and incremental political reality (Manazir, 2023). Theoretically, the policy cycle approach necessitates rational, data-driven policy planning, involving systematic steps from problem identification to agenda formulation and alternative solution development (Süsser et al., 2021). However, in the Global South context, the policy formulation process often reflects an incremental model, where policies are not thoroughly formulated based on comprehensive analysis, but rather because of political compromise, elite pressure, or a response to a momentary crisis (Ascher, 2017). This is particularly problematic for SDG 16 targets, such as 16.6 (building effective and accountable institutions) and 16.7 (inclusive and participatory decision-making), as policies formulated without participation tend to overlook the interests of vulnerable groups and do not guarantee long-term sustainability.

Furthermore, the challenges at the implementation stage are closely related to issues of coordination, institutional capacity, and the approach to policy implementation itself (Domorenok et al., 2021; Ferry, 2021). The two main approaches in policy theory—top-down and bottom-up—display distinct dynamics in the context of implementing SDG 16. On the one hand, the top-down approach that remains dominant in the Global South has led to many policies being centralised, neglecting local contexts, and minimal involvement of grassroots actors (Kumar, 2025; Mohammed et al., 2023). This has an impact on the weak sense of ownership of policymakers at the regional level, leading to passive resistance or even failure to implement. On the other hand, bottom-up approaches that encourage community participation and involve local stakeholders have not received adequate consideration in institutional design (Blimpo et al., 2022; Easterly, 2008). To ensure the achievement of SDG 16.10 (access to information and fundamental freedoms), policies that are inclusive and sensitive to local dynamics are crucial. This inequality is also exacerbated by disparities in bureaucratic capacity between regions, as well as the prevalence of corruption and abuse of authority practices that erode the legitimacy of state institutions.

To truly implement the principles of good governance, the government must undertake a comprehensive review of its existing rigid procedures, which often hinder progress. By enacting forward-thinking policies designed to accommodate the dynamic shifts within society swiftly, the government can foster an environment of enhanced transparency and accountability. Key to this initiative is the streamlining of bureaucratic processes, which involves eliminating unnecessary layers of administration and reducing redundant procedures (Kalyanamitra et al., 2017). These crucial actions will significantly enhance the responsiveness of governmental institutions, enabling them to serve the public better and address the evolving needs of the community with agility and clarity.

The implementation of comprehensive institutional reforms, the promotion of human-centred governance, the elevation of accountability standards, and the

enhancement of public service delivery collectively embody a multitude of core objectives outlined in SDG 16. These initiatives are designed to foster inclusive and participatory governance, ensure transparency in decision-making processes, and improve the quality and accessibility of services provided to the public, ultimately contributing to peaceful, just, and inclusive societies. These efforts not only reflect international commitments but also address local community needs and priorities.

The evaluation phase is not free of substantial challenges. Although normatively, governments have adopted the principle of evidence-based policy-making as part of bureaucratic reform and good governance, policy evaluation practices still tend to be administrative and formalistic (Cairney, 2016). Evaluations rarely depart from strong empirical data and more often become a ritual that does not produce substantive policy feedback. In the context of SDG 16, this poses a significant challenge because the quality of evaluation determines how far public institutions can learn from implementation failures and improve future policy design. Non-participatory evaluations also contribute to low public accountability and reduce opportunities for civil society to contribute to decision-making processes (Islam et al., 2023; Xu et al., 2025). This ultimately degrades the quality of deliberative democracy, which was a key foundation for achieving Targets 16.7 and 16.10.

All three stages demonstrate that achieving SDG 16 is inextricably linked to the quality of the overall policy process. Policies that are not designed rationally and inclusively at the formulation stage will tend to suffer distortions during implementation and are difficult to evaluate accurately in the absence of adequate information and transparency systems (Shawoo et al., 2023). Therefore, efforts to achieve SDG 16 must begin with a comprehensive reform of public policy governance—from strengthening data-driven formulation capacities, creating adaptive and contextual implementation mechanisms, and constructing participatory and transparent evaluation systems. Without structural transformation within the policy process itself, public institutions will remain vulnerable to politicisation, corruption, and fragmentation, ultimately thwarting efforts to achieve sustainable development goals (Armah & Baek, 2015; Atolia et al., 2020). Addressing the challenges of public policy governance is essential for realising the principles of SDG 16, which ultimately fosters a more equitable and effective policy framework.

Considering these challenges, attaining SDG 16 involves not just policy capacity but also the integrity and legitimacy of public institutions. Reforming public policy governance must prioritise SDG values, such as inclusiveness, fairness, transparency, and accountability, as essential foundations throughout the policy cycle. Without a strong commitment to comprehensive institutional enhancement, public policy risks becoming merely a formal document that does not meaningfully alter social conditions. Hence, developing a just and effective policy system is a strategic approach to ensure that the objectives of sustainable development are genuinely embedded in daily governance, rather than remaining only theoretical discourse practices.

Conclusion

The analysis demonstrates that although theoretical frameworks of public policy are essential in guiding policymakers, their practical application is often constrained by multiple challenges. The policy cycle provides a valuable conceptual structure; however, it fails to fully capture the complexities of governance. The rational model, designed to optimise social benefit, frequently encounters obstacles arising from limited information and the constraints of political feasibility. Incrementalism, while pragmatic, risks leading to policy stagnation and inefficiency over time. Evidence-based policymaking presents a promising avenue, yet its effectiveness depends on the availability of reliable data and the commitment of decision-makers to apply empirical evidence.

Addressing the challenges of Sustainable Development Goal 16 within the policy process demands a comprehensive reform of public policy governance—one that prioritises transparency, accountability, and inclusiveness in decision-making. Embedding these principles is essential for building public trust and ensuring the effective implementation of policies that advance the objectives of SDG 16. By engaging with these issues, this research contributes to the ongoing discourse on how adaptive governance frameworks can support the achievement of SDG 16 and promote sustainable development.

In light of these findings, the paper underscores the importance of adaptability, stakeholder engagement, and continuous evaluation throughout the policymaking process. Effective governance requires a nuanced approach that bridges theoretical insights with the realities of practice. Future research should explore hybrid models that integrate the strengths of diverse frameworks, ensuring that policy decisions are both conceptually robust and practically viable.

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