The Dynamics of Conflict in Public Policy Formulation: A Behavioral and Stakeholder Perspective

Muhammad Fajrus Shodiq[1*], Muhammad Hakam Biqy[2]

[1] Universitas 'Aisyiyah Yogyakarta, Yogyakarta Indonesia
[2] Universitas Diponegoro, Semarang, Indonesia
[1*] muhammadfajrusshodiq@unisayogya.ac.id ; [2] muhammadhakambiqy@students.undip.ac.id

* Corresponding author

ABSTRACT

Conflict in public policy formulation is a complex and multidimensional phenomenon that reflects clashes of interest among stakeholders and encompasses individual behavioral dynamics, institutional positions, and the surrounding governance structures. This study aims to analyze the behavioral dimensions of conflict in the policy formulation process by integrating the behavioral conflict and stakeholder theory. A descriptive qualitative method was employed, with data collected through literature studies and policy document analysis. Data analysis was conducted through reduction, presentation, and interpretation processes. The findings reveal that conflict in public policy formulation is triggered by diverging interests and limited actor capacities, politically driven external pressures, and high cognitive heterogeneity. Six behavioral dimensions of conflict internal, external, cognitive heterogeneity, behavioral repertoire, conflict response, and attachment dynamicswere identified as influencing the escalation and resolution of conflict within the policy context. Furthermore, power imbalances among stakeholders contribute to structural conflicts that hinder the realization of inclusive deliberative processes. The discussion highlights the strategic role of public administration in creating collaborative spaces, facilitating inter-party dialogue, and designing conflict resolution mechanisms grounded in values of participation, accountability, and transparency. Therefore, strengthening institutional capacity and designing collaborative governance structures are urgently needed to enhance public policy legitimacy and sustainability. These findings offer conceptual contributions to understanding conflict in public policy and its implications for more responsive and inclusive public administration practices.

1. Introduction

In recent decades, public policy formulation has undergone a significant transformation in both theory and practice. It is no longer viewed as a linear, top-down process dominated by state actors but as a multi-actor, complex, and interactive engagement across sectors. The paradigm of governance drives this shift particularly collaborative governance which calls for active involvement from various stakeholders, including Government institutions, civil society, the

private sector, and non-governmental organizations (NGOs)[1]. Within this evolving framework, collaboration is not merely normative but an imperative expected to enhance the democratic legitimacy, effectiveness, and efficiency of public policies[2].

Nevertheless, collaboration in policy-making often encounters severe constraints. One of the most persistent and complex challenges is conflict among stakeholders. Unlike traditional interpretations that view conflict as a barrier or deviation, conflict is an inherent component of collaborative governance[3]. It arises from the socio-political interactions of diverse actors with competing interests, values, resources, and worldviews. Policy-related conflict is thus not necessarily disruptive; instead, it can be an expression of democratic pluralism[4]. However, when left unmanaged or poorly addressed, conflict can derail the policy process, deepen social tensions, and ultimately undermine the legitimacy and sustainability of the policy outcomes.

Policy formulation in a collaborative setting reflects a deliberative arena where conflicts frequently surface particularly in multi-actor discussions around problem identification, policy design, and evaluation[5]. Each stakeholder enters the process with distinct expectations and agendas. Government actors often represent institutional priorities and political mandates; civil society emphasizes inclusivity, justice, and human rights; the private sector advocates for efficiency and profitability; and NGOs push for equity, transparency, and accountability. These diverging orientations lead to the natural emergence of conflict.

A well documented instance of this phenomenon is the formulation of spatial planning policy in urban contexts. When governments allocate land for industrial or infrastructure projects, local communities may resist due to their exclusion from the decision-making process and the social-ecological damage incurred. Conflicts in such settings emerge due to asymmetrical access to information, unequal representation in forums, and conflicting definitions of the "public good". Policy decisions often face rejection, litigation, or implementation failure when such disputes are not addressed through inclusive and deliberative mechanisms.

From the lens of public administration theory, conflict in policy-making is both instrumental and structural[6]. Instrumental conflicts pertain to procedural and technical

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disagreements such as the choice of policy instruments or data interpretation. In contrast, structural conflicts are rooted in deeper issues, such as unequal power relations, resource access, and representation mechanisms in the governance process. These conflicts are particularly pronounced in Indonesia, where policy spaces are becoming more open, but institutional and behavioral capacities for managing deliberation remain underdeveloped.

Understanding and managing conflict in collaborative governance is not solely a procedural or institutional task but also a behavioral one. The behavior of policy actors their intentions, strategies, perceptions, and capacities significantly influences the trajectory and resolution of conflict. A critical theoretical contribution to this understanding is the behavioral theory of conflict[7], which identifies six key dimensions to explain how individuals and groups engage in conflict.

These dimensions include (1) internal factors, such as actors' competencies, motivations, and willingness to resolve conflict; (2) external conditions, such as situational triggers and institutional constraints; (3) cognitive heterogeneity, referring to differences in perspectives and knowledge frameworks; (4) behavioral repertoires, or the range of conflict response strategies available to actors; (5) patterns of interaction during the conflict; and (6) attachment dynamics that determine commitment to positions or identities. Failing to recognize and manage these behavioral dynamics in complex policy environments often leads to escalation, deadlock, or policy collapse.

Despite the growing literature on collaborative governance, few studies in Indonesia have systematically analyzed the behavioral dimensions of conflict in public policy formulation[8]. Existing research focuses on institutional design or stakeholder mapping, often overlooking how individual and group behaviors interact with institutional structures to shape conflict dynamics. This study addresses that gap by examining the interplay between behavioral conflict theory and collaborative governance practice in Indonesia. It proposes that a deeper understanding of conflict behavior among policy actors can significantly improve policy outcomes by informing more adaptive, inclusive, and democratic conflict management strategies.

Additionally, this article contributes to the academic discourse by demonstrating how public administration can play a proactive role in managing conflict as a discipline and practice. Public administrators are not merely implementers but facilitators of dialogue, mediators of conflict, and curators of inclusive governance spaces. This reconceptualization underscores the need for capacity-building among policy actors, particularly in communication, negotiation, and conflict resolution skills.

From a policy perspective, this study is timely and urgent. Indonesia is experiencing increasing policy complexity due to decentralization, democratization, and global challenges such as climate change and urbanization[9]. These trends heighten the risk of stakeholder conflict in

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policy-making, especially in land use, environmental governance, and social welfare sectors. Policies will likely continue to face legitimacy deficits and implementation barriers without effective mechanisms to address conflict behaviorly and structurally.

In this context, this study's novelty lies in its interdisciplinary approach, which integrates behavioral conflict theory into public policy analysis. While governance literature often emphasizes institutional reform and participatory frameworks, this study posits that individual and collective behavior is the missing link in understanding why many collaborative efforts fail or succeed. The article also proposes a conceptual model for analyzing conflict behavior in policy formulation, which can be tested and refined in future empirical research.

Thus, the purpose of this study is twofold: first, to analyze the behavioral dimensions of conflict among stakeholders in collaborative public policy formulation, and second, to explore the role of public administration in managing these conflicts constructively. This paper aims to generate insights for theory development, policy design, and practical governance interventions through a conceptual and analytical exploration.

The main research problem addressed in this article is: How do behavioral dynamics among stakeholders influence the emergence, escalation, and resolution of conflict in collaborative public policy formulation, and what role can public administration play in facilitating constructive conflict management? Answering this question is critical for enhancing public policy legitimacy, responsiveness, and sustainability, particularly in contexts where governance is becoming increasingly participatory yet contentious.

2. Research Method

This study employs a descriptive qualitative approach to understand stakeholder conflict dynamics in the public policy formulation process. This approach is selected because the study focuses on portraying phenomena holistically, emphasizing the meanings, perceptions, and social interactions among policy actors. Data collection is conducted through two primary methods: literature review and policy document analysis. The literature review examines scholarly works, journals, and articles relevant to conflict behavior theory, stakeholder theory, and collaborative governance practices in public administration. Meanwhile, the analysis of policy documents encompasses public documents such as legislation, minutes from policy forums, policy reports, and strategic planning documents that reflect cross-actor interactions in the formulation process.

Data analysis in this study follows the interactive model proposed by Miles and Huberman, which consists of three key stages[10]: (1) Data reduction, involving the selection, focus, simplification, and transformation of raw data into a more analyzable form; (2) Data display, conducted through thematic narratives and conceptual matrices to organize the findings; and (3) Conclusion drawing and verification, achieved through theoretical interpretation and source triangulation to obtain a valid understanding of stakeholder conflict dynamics. This study is expected to produce a comprehensive mapping of the forms, causes, and consequences of conflict in public policy formulation and to provide both theoretical and practical contributions to the field of public administration.

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3. Results and Discussion

This section systematically discusses the dynamics of stakeholder conflicts in public policy formulation, referencing the six dimensions of conflict behavior while considering stakeholder positions and the context of collaborative governance[11]. In this context, conflict is understood as a clash of interests and a complex phenomenon arising from the socio-political interactions among policy actors.

3.1. Internal Dimensions of Conflict

The internal dimension includes the psychological and motivational aspects of stakeholders engaged in conflict, namely their capacities, intentions, interests, and position toward resolution. In public policy formulation practice, this dimension is reflected in the actors' abilities to comprehend policy issues, negotiate, and devise influence strategies. For instance, in urban spatial planning conflicts, Government actors may possess strong technocratic capacities to draft plans but cannot foster effective social dialogue.

Intentions and interests also serve as key drivers of conflict. Local governments may strongly intend to accelerate investment, whereas local communities may struggle to protect their living space and cultural identity[12]. On the other hand, the tendency to resolve conflict peacefully often depends on political orientation, leadership characteristics, and the legitimacy of the policy formulation process. Actors who perceive themselves as having weak bargaining positions often avoid open conflict, though prolonged pressure can eventually erupt into public protest.

3.2. External Dimensions and Strategic Conditions

The external dimension refers to macro-level contexts that influence the intensity and direction of conflict, including political pressure, legislative deadlines, power relations, and media dynamics[13]. In a decentralized governance system like Indonesia's, top-down pressure from the central Government on regional authorities to rapidly enact regulations can create friction with civil society, notably when communities feel excluded from meaningful participation.

When public participation is merely formal or absent, conflict becomes inevitable. Policy legitimacy weakens when not built upon an open and deliberative process. This environment creates a gray area where political elites or economic oligarchs may manipulate policy decisions for their interests. Disparities in access to information and representation within the formulation process further exacerbate structural injustices, often at the root of policy-related conflicts.

3.3. Cognitive Heterogeneity Among Actors

One of the primary sources of conflict in public policy formulation is the divergence in perception, worldview, and cognitive frameworks among actors[14]. Government actors often

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perceive policy as a technocratic instrument aimed at achieving efficiency. In contrast, civil society views policy as something that should be grounded in social justice values and cultural contextualization[15] .

For instance, in natural resource management policies, the government may regard such policies as opportunities for national economic development, while indigenous communities view them as threats to their ancestral heritage. These differences lead to miscommunication and distortion of meaning, which, in turn, reinforce resistance and hinder deliberative processes. Cognitive heterogeneity may also exist within actors in the same sector. Within bureaucratic institutions, differing interpretations among technical agencies regarding policy direction often result in inconsistencies and spark internal governmental conflicts.

3.4. Behavioral Repertoires in Conflict

Behavioral repertoires reflect the actual strategies actors employ in responding to conflict, whether cooperative, competitive, or confrontational[16]. In public policy formulation, this variation is evident in the different approaches stakeholders use to voice their aspirations. For example, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) often resort to litigation to annul policies they deem detrimental to the public[17]. On the other hand, civil society coalitions may form strategic alliances to advocate for alternative policies. Some groups even choose direct action methods such as demonstrations or digital campaigns to influence public opinion and pressure policymakers.

Meanwhile, Government actors may adopt reactive behaviors such as delaying or revising policies to avoid open conflict. However, such approaches are typically temporary and fail to address the root causes of the conflict. In some cases, avoidance strategies even reinforce perceptions of injustice, triggering larger-scale collective action.

3.5. Dimensions of Conflict Response

Responses to conflict are not solely rational but also involve complex emotional and cognitive dimensions. In public forums, emotional tension frequently surfaces in anger, disappointment, and frustration, expressed through verbal statements, gestures, or symbolic protest. Cognitively, actors construct assessments and perceptions of their adversaries based on past experiences, available information, and media framing. These perceptions inform their stance and strategic choices. Conflict may escalate into social polarization when left unresolved and obstruct long-term collaboration.

In practice, poorly managed conflict can delegitimize Government actors, erode public trust, and push communities toward informal or destructive channels for expressing their

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grievances[18]. Therefore, understanding emotional and cognitive responses is crucial in designing effective communication and conflict resolution strategies in public administration.

3.6. Dynamics of Social Ties and Relationships

Social relationships among actors both formal and informal play a vital role in conflict dynamics. For example, strong ties between public officials and local business elites may lead to perceived bias and conflicts of interest, undermining public trust in policy decisions. Conversely, robust interpersonal relationships between Government actors and local communities can serve as social capital to support dialogue and collaboration. However, such relationships require a firm commitment to transparency, inclusivity, and accountability in policy formulation processes.

Group loyalty often intensifies conflicts, which hinders individuals' ability to take neutral or compromising positions. In-group and out-group dynamics exacerbate social fragmentation and complicate consensus-building. Therefore, strengthening cross-group social networks is a key element in building collaborative governance systems that are resilient to conflict.

3.7. Stakeholder Identification

The formulation of public policy invariably involves multiple actors with differing interests[19]. Key stakeholders include central and local governments, national and regional legislatures (DPR/DPRD), civil society organizations, the private sector, academia, and mass media. Each actor brings distinct values, visions, and resources that shape their bargaining position within the policy arena.

Power asymmetry among actors is a primary source of structural conflict. Governments often possess legal authority and budgetary control, while civil society tends to wield only normative and moral influence. This imbalance hampers equitable policy negotiations and heightens the risk of exclusion. Systematic stakeholder mapping must be conducted from the early stages of policy formulation to address this. Each actor should be identified based on their roles, interests, and level of influence. Equitable and proportional participatory strategies must be implemented to ensure all voices are heard and considered reasonably.

3.8. Dynamics of Social Ties and Relationships

Public administration cannot adopt a neutral or passive stance in the face of conflicts among policy actors. On the contrary, the bureaucracy must function as a facilitator of dialogue, a guardian of process integrity, and a provider of deliberative spaces that promote constructive conflict resolution. Institutional reform is, therefore, urgent. Public institutions must strengthen participatory mechanisms such as public consultations, multi-stakeholder forums, and independent mediation. In addition, a conflict governance protocol grounded in transparency, accountability, and participation is essential.

The strategic role of public administration also involves enhancing human resource capacities to understand conflict theory, engage in cross-actor communication, and facilitate deliberative processes. Civil service education and training should include modules on conflict resolution and collaborative governance. Overall, the dynamics of conflict in public policy formulation reflect the complex interplay between structure and agency, interests and values, and power and participation. Therefore, only through a multidimensional and collaborative

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approach can public administration serve as a unifying agent within an inclusive and responsive democratic system.

4. Conclusion

Conflict in public policy formulation is an inevitable phenomenon—complex and multidimensional. It is not merely a matter of differing interests among actors but also reflects the interaction between individual behavioral factors, institutional positions, and the underlying governance structures that shape the policy process. In public administration, conflict should not be viewed solely as a dysfunction; rather, it must be understood as a natural dynamic within a pluralistic, ever-changing, and uncertain environment. Conflict arises from the intersection of values, unequal distribution of resources, and the diversity of perspectives and interests held by policy stakeholders. Conflict behavior theory offers a critical lens to understand how individuals and groups respond to such differences. This approach highlights psychosocial aspects, such as perceptions, attitudes, and actor motivations in conflict situations. In many cases, conflict in public policy formulation is not only about the substance of the issue but also relates to modes of communication, power relations, and levels of trust among actors. The theory helps explain why conflicts may escalate, stagnate, or be transformed, depending on the actors' strategies—individually or collectively. Often, conflict escalation is not rooted in irreconcilable differences but rather in failures to foster open and inclusive communication.

In practice, public administration faces a significant challenge in managing such conflicts constructively. As the policy implementer, the state can no longer rely solely on a top-down approach. Instead, the modern bureaucracy is expected to act as a facilitator of collaborative spaces among policy actors. This approach emphasizes the importance of public participation, deliberation, and negotiation throughout every stage of the public policy formulation processfrom problem identification to policy impact evaluation. Policy forums, community deliberations, and inter sectoral dialogues must be strengthened as mechanisms to prevent unilateral domination and minimize the risk of prolonged conflict. Public administration must develop institutional capacity in conflict mediation and resolution. Includes training public officials in effective communication, negotiation, and evidence-based policymaking. Conflict resolution mechanisms must be formal but flexible and adaptive to the social and cultural contexts in which policies are implemented. Mediation that incorporates local values and community wisdom is often more effective in bridging policy conflicts at the grassroots level.

Accordingly, several strategic recommendations are proposed. First, the Government should strengthen its role as a dialogue facilitator rather than merely a decision-maker. It involves promoting participatory approaches at every stage of the policy cycle, ensuring the engagement of civil society actors, the private sector, and vulnerable groups. Second, the capacity of stakeholders must be enhanced, particularly in policy literacy, advocacy, and conflict resolution. Third, the principles of inclusivity, transparency, and accountability must form the foundation for designing sustainable policies responsive to social dynamics. Conflict in public policy formulation should not be regarded as a system failure but rather as a reflection of the democratization of decision-making processes. When managed appropriately, conflict can become a source of innovation, reinforce policy legitimacy, and promote ongoing institutional learning. An adaptive, collaborative, and socially responsive public administration is a key prerequisite for building a policy governance system that is effective, just, and genuinely aligned with the broader public interest.

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