

Agenda Setting and Elite Consensus Building for National Development in Nigeria

Prof. Yusufu Ali Zoaka

Dept. of Political Science and International Relations Faculty of Social Science University of Abuja

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***Corresponding Author:** Prof. Yusufu Ali Zoaka

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Abstract

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Society is confronted with numerous issues and challenges on a daily basis, many of which remain unnoticed by policymakers due to limited media attention. The agenda-setting process plays a crucial role in determining which issues gain visibility in public discourse, as gatekeepers selectively filter information into international, national, regional, and local agendas. Within the field of Political Science, particularly Public Policy Analysis, agenda setting is a vital stage of the policy process. It shapes the prioritization of issues and guides the allocation of resources, forming the foundation for policy formulation and implementation. This paper explores the concept of agenda setting, highlighting its significance in the policy formulation process and its impact on government decision-making.

Keywords: Agenda setting, public policy, political science, policy formulation, government decision-making.

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INTRODUCTION

There are usually numerous issues, problems, demands, and challenges that confront society daily which never get noticed by policymakers, simply because the news media has not promoted them in the news outlets. Within the realm of agenda setting, some gatekeepers allow certain information to be filtered into international, national—regional, and local discourse. Agenda setting is a significant concept within the field of Political Science especially in Public Policy Analysis. Policy analysis constitutes a significant element of government decision-making. One of the critical stages in policy analysis especially at the policy formulation stage is agenda setting, a conceptual process of deciding which issues deserve attention and resources. It forms the basis for subsequent policy formulation and implementation. This paper delves into providing an understanding of agenda-setting in the policy formulation process.

Elites

Elites, by common definition, refer to a group of individuals in society that wield superior attributes such as education, wealth, and influence (Field and Higley, 1980). These individuals are seen as the major decision-makers, with

their actions and decisions considerably impacting the trajectory of society. This is why Mosca posited that in all societies whether they are advance or primitive two classes of people appear those who rule and those that are ruled. He went further to assert. that those who rule are few in number and always rule in their interest. Therefore, in all societies and systems those who rule are few and rule in their interest. However, it is expected that those who rule will be interested in the survival of the system to guarantee the protection of their interest

Self-Enlightened Interest

The concept of 'self-enlightened interest' is an aspect tied intrinsically to elites - it is a behavioral trait in which these individuals take action that is not only beneficial to their interests but indirectly, for the common good (Boucoyannis, 2015). This mutual correlation is often seen as a byproduct of their elite status.

Scholars like Pareto (1935) and Michael Hart (2000) have proposed theories on this topic. Pareto, for instance, asserts that elites have a moral duty to display enlightened self-interest, as it is society's well-being they must uphold. Similarly, Hart

suggests that enlightened self-interest is tied to human dignity and promotes social responsibility.

Agenda Setting: An Overview

Dearing and Rogers (1996) defined agenda setting as "the constant battle among competing public issues to gain the attention of media outlets, public officials, and the public itself". This initial step in policymaking does not merely involve identifying problems but determining their significance and whether actions should be taken to resolve them (Cobbledick, 2008).

To manage the numerous issues demanding government attention, policymakers have developed systematic procedures to streamline priorities - a process now commonly known as agenda setting. Such procedures can vary based on a variety of factors including political context, available resources, and societal pressures.

The Role of Agenda Setting in Policy Formulation

The importance of the agenda-setting stage in policy formulation is paramount. It molds the direction of the policy-making process by identifying and prioritizing issues that warrant attention. As Jones and Baumgartner (2012) explain, the process of agenda-setting is guided by problem recognition, policy alternatives, and political will.

Problem recognition refers to understanding the nature and magnitude of a problem, its effects on society, and the concerns it raises. Policy alternatives involve the analysis of possible solutions to the problem identified. Finally, political will assess the readiness of politicians to champion the policy alternatives proposed.

The agenda-setting phase in policy analysis also brings forward the notion of "issue attention cycles" (Hilgartner and Bosk, 1988), which revolve around the rise and fall of public issues on the policy agenda. They argue that these cycles consist of stages: pre-problem, alarmed discovery, realizing the cost of significant progress, the gradual decline of intense public interest, and the post-problem stage. Understanding these cycles provides key insights into the lifespan of policy issues and potential challenges in policy formulation and implementation.

Types of agenda-setting

There are broadly speaking two types of Agenda setting, namely situational and institutional agendas

Situational agenda setting

Firstly, situational agenda-setting delves into issues that arise out of unforeseen or unexpected events (Roberts, 1992). Sudden incidents like natural disasters, epidemics, or economic crises, necessitate immediate attention and action. This results in shifting public attention towards these matters. Politicians, news outlets, and influencers have to act promptly to maintain public trust and assuage concerns.

Institutional agenda setting

Institutional agenda on the other hand involves topics of perennial significance that are fundamental to the nation's well-being and democratic functionality (Cobb and Elder, 1972). Issues like economics, development, national security, education, and, healthcare typically feature on the institutional agenda. These subjects need to be at the forefront of discussion for progress and national interest.

Agenda Setting Process

At any given time, many problems and issues will be competing for the attention of public officials who will have their pet ideas to push. Only a few of them will succeed in securing agenda status, however, because officials lack the time resources, interest, information, or will to consider many of them. Agenda building is thus a competitive process, and a number of factors determine whether an issue gets on the agenda. Some of the factors suggested by political scientist Truman (1984) include

1. Interest groups seek to maintain themselves in a state of reasonable equilibrium by assessing the threat to their positions and whether the threat is capable of causing great disturbance or not.
2. Political leadership is considered another important factor in agenda setting. As noted by Anderson (1984, 85) political leaders, whether motivated by consideration of political advantage, concern for the public interest, or an urge to enhance their political reputations, may seize upon particular problems.
3. The president, parliament, and government agencies may also serve as agenda setters.
4. Items may achieve agenda status and be acted upon as a result of some sort of crisis, natural disaster, or sensational events such as flooding or an airplane disaster.
5. Protest activity which may include actual or threatened violence is another means by which problems may be brought to the attention of policy makers. For example, #EndSars protest, Insecurity courtesy of banditry, terrorist and kidnappers have compelled the Government to develop policies to address the challenges.
6. Changes in statistical indicators may also produce awareness of problems and help move them onto agendas. The increase in the number of people thrown into multidimensional poverty from 82.9 million between 2015-2019 and then it grew to 133 million in 2022. This made the government make new policies such as conditional cash transfer, trader moni, farmer moni, etc, to alleviate the problem and reduce hunger between 2015-2023.
7. Political changes, including election results, changes in administrations, and shifts in the public mood may move an agenda item.

Steps Involved in Agenda Setting

1. **Problem Identification:** The first phase in agenda-setting involves identifying the issue at hand (Robinson, 2018). The matter can be an idea, topic, problem, or any subject requiring attention or discussion. The clarity surrounding the issue plays a vital role in how the agenda proceeds.
2. **Collecting Information:** The second step is the collection of relevant data related to the issue (Kingdon, 1995). The information gathered will contribute to the basis for discussion during the meeting and help to provide more context on the topic at hand.
3. **Prioritization and Sorting:** Having identified the issue and collected the necessary information, the next step consists of organizing and prioritizing the subject matter (Cobb and Elder, 1972). This step is critical to ensure that the group tackles crucial matters first.
4. **Drafting the Agenda:** This step involves itemizing the different subjects and arranging them logically (Hill and Jones, 2010). The drafter should set an appropriate time allocation for each discussion, ensuring a seamless flow.
5. **Delegating Responsibility:** Here, tasks are assigned to specific individuals for the execution of various roles in the meeting. Ensuring that each participant has a role to play in the meeting creates engagement and boosts overall efficiency (Hill and Jones, 2010).
6. **Final Review & Dissemination:** The final step is reviewing the agenda to ensure its cohesion and applicability. After the review, the dissemination of the agenda to stakeholders will follow suit (Hill and Jones, 2010).

Challenges in Agenda Setting

While the importance of agenda setting is well-recognized, executing it effectively poses several challenges. The process can be influenced by power dynamics, making prioritization subjective to bias and manipulation, potentially leading to the neglect of pressing social needs (Cobb and Ross, 1997).

Moreover, certain policy issues may be overlooked or undermined due to societal cognitive limits and "decay rates" (Jones and Baumgartner, 2012). These issues highlight the importance of adopting strategic and comprehensive approaches in agenda-setting to ensure the formulation of meaningful and relevant policies.

Understanding Agenda Setting: A Step-By-Step Guide

Agenda-setting remains one of the most critical elements in the structure of any formal or informal gathering,

particularly within professional environments (Smith, 2011). It helps to define the objective and target goals of the meeting. However, it involves several vital steps, which this paper seeks to explicitly explain.

Agenda Setting for Elite Consensus in Nigeria

Agenda-setting theory postulates that mass media have a substantial influence in shaping the public discourse, directing what audiences think about more than how to think about it (McCombs, 2004). This paper examines how agenda-setting can be used to facilitate elite consensus in Nigeria, focusing on the media's role, regime transparency, inclusive dialogue, and reforming political practices.

Media's Role

In Nigeria, the role of the media in agenda-setting is critical (Akpan, Effiong & Ekpenyong, 2012). The media can play a vital role in building consensus amongst elites by providing a balanced information platform, thereby promoting dialogue and interaction. Mass media can choose to emphasize certain society's pungent issues, compelling the elites to engage and debate, possibly leading to a consensus.

Regime Transparency

Considering Nigeria's chequered political history, transparency from the governing elites could represent a significant stride towards an elite consensus. The commitment to greater transparency exposes government operations and decisions openly (Akinola, 2010). This transparency will demonstrate the government's readiness to invite public scrutiny and will encourage elite consensus as everyone becomes more cognizant of the limitations of the ruling regimes' actions.

Inclusive Dialogue

Nigeria's ethno-linguistic fragmentation necessitates an inclusive dialogue that incorporates elites from various cultural, regional, and ideological backgrounds (Ojo, 2009). Inclusion in critical discussions proves to the elites that their opinions are respected and acknowledged. In turn, this cultivates a culture of trust and understanding, critical ingredients for achieving elite consensus. To promote elite consensus, the 'core elites' must consider the 'peripheral elite' by promoting their inclusion in the governance structures of society consequently, instead of the women, youth, and PWDs being allowed to make their way to the table, through the highly monetized elections, the core elites can accede to the demands for quota representation as practiced in other climes, by reserving seats for these marginalized peripheral elite groups.

Reforming Political Practices

Nigeria's political arena is often characterized by domineering leaders and few genuine democratic practices (Amuwo, 2012). A shift in such dynamics will likely pave the way for elite consensus. Political reform, through the implementation and enforcement of democratic practices, will

ensure that leaders' actions align more closely with the public interest. This realignment will make it easier for the elites to find common ground and facilitate consensus.

Agenda-setting to foster elite consensus is a complex task in Nigeria. Nevertheless, leveraging the influence of media to spotlight pertinent societal issues, the promotion of regime transparency, the embracement of inclusive dialogue, and reforms in the political landscape might be instrumental steps towards that achievement. Whilst each approach has unique challenges, their collective potential in fostering elite consensus is undeniable.

Negative Aspects of Agenda Setting

Despite being a pivotal process, undue emphasis on certain issues in agenda setting could potentially overshadow other significant matters, leading to an imbalance in policy development. Consequently, advisors and policymakers must exercise discretion during the agenda-setting process, ensuring it caters to the collective needs, rather than being solely driven by media or political influence—another crucial element in elite consensus building for a self-enlightened interest.

The concept of elites in society can be traced back to classical theories of social stratification, which posits that society's power, wealth, and influence are held by a small group of people referred to as elites (Parsons, 1969). This paper delved into an analysis of these "elites" and their display of self-enlightened interest, bringing in renowned perspectives of various scholars.

The question of the genuine nature of this self-enlightened interest amongst elites remains a point of debate. Whereas some argue it as an intentional strategy for maintaining their hegemony or for personal benefit, others propose that it is an inherent trait as a result of their elite status - a sense of noblesse oblige. The specifics largely depend on variables such as societal structure, cultural norms, and political landscapes.

In a democratic society, for instance, the act of self-enlightened interest differs from that seen in an autocratic society. Here, elites engaging in public service and benevolent acts can be seen as strategic for securing societal support for maintaining their privileged positions (Lasswell, 1958). However, the ethical implications of such practices come into question.

An Analysis of Elites' Self-Enlightened Interest and Agenda Setting in a Democracy

The relationship between politics, socio-economic elites, and democracy has been a subject of sustained investigation and debate. Particularly, the elites' self-enlightened interest and its role in agenda-setting in democratic societies stands out as a curious subject. Using various scholarly sources, this paper attempts to elucidate this intricate relationship.

Socio-economic elites are those individuals who possess the highest level of economic resources and exert significant control over political power structures (Higley & Burton, 2006). They possess an elevating power to influence socio-

political narratives due to their omnipresence in politics, media, and societal institutions (Jones & Baumgartner, 2005).

Schumpeter (1942, as cited in Bottomore, 1993) observed that elites have "self-enlightened interest". They comprehend that their prosperity is tied to the health of the system they dominate. Hence, they tend to ensure the welfare of the system, albeit indirectly. This represents a form of indirect altruism, to preserve their position.

An excellent demonstration of 'self-enlightened interest' can be found in education policies. Elites recognize the importance of a well-educated populace to maintaining an innovative, productive economy which, in turn, secures their wealth and status (Winship, 2013).

Agenda-setting theory proposes that the most critical issues in society are determined largely by media, influenced by political and economic elites (McCombs & Shaw, 1972). In essence, these elites determine the issues that form the 'public agenda'.

Elites influence the public policy agenda through multiple avenues: direct involvement in politics, use of think tanks to shape ideas, control of media, and political donations (Page, Bartels & Seawright, 2013). By utilizing these avenues, they set the parameters of the policy discourse, effectively controlling what is and what is not considered by policy-makers.

This analysis demonstrates that the elite's self-enlightened interests can significantly drive agenda-setting in democratic societies. Yet, it invites the question of democratic equality, as it infers that the power to set the public agenda lies undemocratically in the hands of a few. Future research should address this democratic quandary and propose ways to harmonize the elite's self-enlightened interest with democratic equality.

The historical frame of 'enlightened self-interest' traces back to Enlightenment philosophies originating from Western Europe (Mokyr, 2016). This concept signifies a spark of self-interest that promotes not just individual prosperity but societal welfare too. Elites in developed countries, often influenced by this philosophy, reportedly act in an enlightened self-interest more frequently than their counterparts in developing nations.

For instance, philanthropic activities among elites in developed nations exemplify enlightened self-interest. Data from 'Giving USA' highlights that American elites donated roughly 427.71 billion dollars in 2018, investing in education, health, environmental sustainability, and more (www.givingusa.org). This indicates how enlightened self-interest motivates them to enact social change.

However, it's essential to avoid painting a homogenous picture of developed countries' elites. The differing levels of social responsibility and enlightenment may vary significantly even within these countries. An example is the varying responses to climate change among elites globally and their diverse profitability-driven, sustainability-centered approaches (Layzer, 2012).

Furthermore, elites in developing countries often confront a different set of issues, making their aspirational goals different from those in developed countries (Chandra, 2017). They are

frequently more focused on achieving economic prosperity in nations where poverty and unemployment rates are high. For example, elites in India have played a critical role in digital transformations leading to economic growth and job creation (Indian Technology Industry, 2020).

However, it's worth noting that enlightened self-interest among the elites is not absent in developing countries (Pande, 2020). There have been numerous instances of philanthropic contributions from elites in nations like Nigeria, China, Mexico, and others toward social causes (www.philanthropy.com). However, the scale might not be as grand as in some developed nations.

Comparatively, it seems the pattern of initiating and pursuing beneficial social changes varies across countries based on their economic and sociopolitical contexts.

Why is building elite consensus important

Consensus building is crucial for national development because it helps create a unified direction for policy, governance, and resource use. In a diverse and often polarized political or social landscape, building consensus ensures that development initiatives are inclusive, stable, and sustainable. Below are key points highlighting its importance?

1. Promotes Political Stability

When political elites, institutions, and stakeholders agree on national goals, it reduces the chances of conflict, political rivalry, or gridlock. Stability encourages investment, both domestic and foreign, which is essential for economic growth.

2. Encourages Inclusive Development

Consensus ensures that different voices (ethnic, religious, regional, gender, class) are heard and considered in the decision-making process. This results in policies that reflect the collective needs of the people, not just the ruling elite or a single group.

3. Enhances Policy Continuity

National development plans require long-term implementation, which can be disrupted by changes in leadership. With consensus, successive governments are more likely to uphold existing development agendas (e.g., Nigeria's Vision 2020 or Agenda 2063 at the African Union level).

4. Reduces Social Tensions and Conflicts

In countries with deep social divisions, consensus building fosters dialogue and compromise, helping to prevent violent conflicts. It strengthens national identity and unity by emphasizing shared goals.

5. Builds Trust in Governance

Citizens are more likely to support government programs if they see broad-based agreement among leaders,

civil society, and experts. It boosts legitimacy and accountability of public institutions.

6. Strengthens Democratic Governance

Consensus is a core value of participatory democracy. Through, deliberative processes, it enhances transparency, civic engagement, and respect for rule of law.

7. Facilitates Effective Implementation of Development Programs

Consensus leads to stronger cooperation across ministries, agencies, and even between federal and state/local governments. It helps avoid duplication, wastage, or sabotage of projects.

Examples

South Africa's post-apartheid development: The Truth and Reconciliation Commission and inclusive policies were products of national consensus.

Rwanda's development after the genocide: Strong consensus among political elites and citizens allowed for rapid social and economic recovery.

Ghana's stable democracy: Despite competitive elections, elite consensus on democratic norms has contributed to peaceful power transitions and steady development.

CONCLUSION

In this paper, we have attempted to discuss agenda setting and an overview by explaining the importance of Agenda setting as an indispensable tool in the domain of policy making. It carves out the path for critical issues to be addressed effectively. This process though governed by several forces, must pivot around genuine public interest and development goals. Striking a balance is key here, ensuring no critical issue remains veiled due to disproportionate attention to certain areas. Hence, it is essential that stakeholders involved, exercise judicious discretion in the process of agenda setting, ensuring effective, holistic, and fair policy making. We have also shown that agenda-setting plays a pivotal role in policy analysis, by systematically identifying and prioritizing issues that warrant governmental attention and action. Despite its challenges, when executed effectively, it facilitates the development of more appropriate, responsive, and meaningful policies-ultimately feeding into a more productive and effective democracy.

As an important component of this paper, we also analyzed the enlightened self-interest of elites as an intriguing domain that varies vastly in its manifestations across countries. While evidence suggests that, on a general level, the elites of developed countries may act with more enlightened self-interest than those in most developing countries, it's not a conclusive trait. Contextual factors like societal norms, economic stability, political landscapes, and other elements collectively influence the elites' interests and actions in any given nation. Given this

analysis, it's indeed fascinating to dissect and understand the complexities of enlightened self-interest among the elite in different regions. However, more robust and comparative studies are required to fully comprehend how this philosophical concept impacts their actions and contributes to societal transformation.

In conclusion we have shown that elites play a pivotal role in building national consensus on issues that if addressed could trigger the developmental path as witnessed in the USA, Singapore, Indonesia, India, Botswana, China, among several other countries that have built elite consensus for national development. In order to avoid a disastrous end and to move the ship of state on steady progress there is a compelling need for national elites to rescue the ship of state from imminent collapse by reaching national consensus on the major issues that have been bedeviling the state, such as corruption, state police, state religion, citizenship, the lack of economic and political development among other issues.

Consensus building is not about eliminating dissent but about forging common ground for progress. In the context of national development, it transforms diversity into a strength, ensuring that development is equitable, enduring, and people-centered.

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