



The Concept of Public Interest in the Context of Public Sector Governance and Good Democratic Government

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Abstract: The concept of public interest is debatable but helpful. There are pros and cons toward this concept. This concept assists a government to consider seriously the interest of people in its jurisdiction. Public interest, arguably, helps bureaucrats and public officers to differentiate their own interests to the interest of the public. Ethically, the proper understanding to the concept of public interest will direct the government to provide policies, programs, and activities for the benefits of individuals and communities. Agencies and their public servants will be at the side of public when their programs and activities can answer the public issues faced by individuals and communities. Public interest will be considered as a crucial concept in public sector governance that exists in a good democratic nation. At the arena of public governance, public interest is able to provide a configuration of public needs and demands of individual and communities, and then in turn, stakeholders can play appropriate roles in contributing to the achievement of the public needs. Meanwhile, a good democratic government is an arena that compatible with public interest. In this paradigm, public interest is worthy because theoretically, the government needs public interest in order to serve the people properly. However, there are many problems in answering public interest even in a democratic nation, but surely the condition in undemocratic regimes is much worst.

Keywords: public interest, public governance, democracy

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Introduction

Understanding public interest is really important not only for public servants but politicians as well. Public interest depicts the need of individuals, communities, and citizens in a governmental arena and requires that they be met properly. Specifically public interest exists in relation to governmental policies (Oppenheim, 1981, p.124). Therefore, it could be said that understanding the concept of public interest will bring governments to undertake their activities for the public. This is crucial because, perhaps

without the public interests governments cannot produce policies, programmes, and activities to fulfill citizens' needs. However, there are many factors that can cause governments to produce policy that avoid the interest of the public. It has become evident that, in many countries, governments initiate policies, programmes, and activities that ignore the public interest.

In a democratic governmental arena, it is essential that the public interest be met by governments because it represents the people and governments are accountable to the people. At the other end of spectrum, undemocratic governments do not consider the public interest in their daily operation. These governments tend to be corrupts and fulfill their own vested interest. However, even in democratic countries, it is not easy to meet the public interest. Many pieces of evidence show that governments that avoid public interest lose their popularity and lose the next general election. This essay will discuss the importance of the concept of public interest, its assistances to categorize ethical standards, and its contributions to public sector governance and good democratic government.

The concepts of public interest in governmental arena

Public interest possesses many meanings depends on perspective to observe it. Rationalists, idealists, realists, and bentlians define public interest differently. Each of them offers different values on public interest. In essence, they agree that the public interest refers to the "common well being" of "public good." The public interest is central to policy debates, politics, democracy and the nature of government itself (Wikipedia, 25 April, 2007). However at early research by Schubert concludes that there is no public interest theory that is worthy of the name (Schubert, 1960, pp.199-203). Similarly, Held specifically argues that "The public interest has been thought to be a vacuous, deceptive, and generally useless term (1970, p.1)." Sorauf agrees in the perspective that public interest is too loaded with lots of meanings for precious use as an instrument of political study (1957, P.329). This is really confusing, but interesting because most people believe that there is public interest.

Richard E. Flathman tried to build the meaning of public interest by the late 1960's. Although at first use it seems that the meaning of public interest is similar with common good and general tranquility, Flathman shows the significant differences among these terms (Helds, 1970, p.2). Flathman asserts that "We can say that public interest is used to express approval or commendation for policies adopted or proposed by government, we can investigate what philosophers call the logic of the discourse of commendation in the area of politics (1966, p.4)." He argues from the sense of normative discourse in the broad spectrum that whoever declares that something is in the public interest implies that there are proper reasons for stating so (Flathman, 1966, p.5). In this context, it could be said that public interest exists. For instance, roads, bridges, hospitals, schools, and water supply are in the context of public interest. These public goods can emerge after governments implementing their policies through programs and activities.

In addition, Brian Barry argues that the concept of public interest does not need normative content at all. He defines that public interest is the common interest which results in satisfying those wants which all members of a community share, and constitutes the public interest (1965, p.190). Moreover, Openheim asserts that public interest is an action that not to fulfill the self interest of the actors but to meet the collective welfare of at least most (majority) of the people in a governmental arena (1981, pp.123-135). Though, it should be cautious in relation with the possibility to the emergence of the majority dictatorship. If this occurs, the welfare and the needs of the minority or the marginalized groups

will be ignored in government's policies. Moreover, actors in governmental arena should be able to differentiate between their own interest and the public's. This is crucial because without this governments at all stages will be blurred in making policies. For instance, based on my anecdotal experience, in many local governments in Indonesia, so often the governments' policies only benefit the mayors, head of regencies, and senior officials not the public. In many cases these people use the terms of public interest to fulfill their own interest, they use this term as a mask. For instance, Kupang City government built a fancy official house for the Kupang Mayor, the price of this luxury house was around fourteen billion rupiah in 2005-2006. Meanwhile, many babies and children in this city were experiencing malnutrition, many public schools were unworthy, and the water supply was not sufficient for the public.

There is a vital distinction at the issue between the idea of an essential public interest (classical perspective) and its operational meanings (contemporary perspective) (Meyer, 1975, p.7). Held (1970) suggests that it seems that the officials in governmental arena consider that public interest is important. In contrast, the academics tend to set out the concept of the public interest (1970, p.10). Explicitly, Colm says that it is impossible for the politicians, statesmen, judges, and bureaucrats who are intimately connected to the formulation of government policies can conduct policy without the concept of public interest (1960, p.306-307). In this context, it could be considered that public interest that public interest is crucial in the governmental arena in making policies. Pragmatically, public interest at least gives a big picture for good governments in formulating, implementing and executing their policies. Meyer (1975) argues that "The case that the question of the public interest is neither meaningless nor unanswerable, the context is the ideological and theoretical rejection of the public interest in America (1975, p.14)." Hence, Mulgan (2000) vividly defines that "public interest is one shared by all members of a given political community and include those interests which all members have in common as the members of the public (2000, p.6). In this point, it is really clear that public interest is vital in governance arenas.

Public interest as a provisional way of categorizing ethical standards

Individuals who work in governmental organizations need to behave ethically in order to carry out their functions and tasks properly. In essence, the role of governmental organizations is to meet the need of public/citizens by providing and delivering public good and public services. The need of citizens has definitely a strong relationship with the public interest. In the other words, it could be said that the public sector functions to promote the public interest. Hence, ethical standards are important in forming a means by which public servants can perform in a high integrity. Mulgan emphasizes that the concept of public interest emerges in several context that connected with public service capability and professional ethics (2000, p.10). More specifically, Hicks argues that "it is to the public that the members of parliament (public office holders) are accountable and the maintenance of ethical values and standards provides a basis, in the absence of face to face contact and observation, for public to judge whether their representatives are indeed acting in the public interest (1998, p.115)." In this token, this concept also is applying in all governmental arenas. Ministers, senior officials and public servants are should behave ethically in order to perform professionally. At the same time the corruption actions toward public resources at least could be brought to the lowest level. It is interesting also to observe that the public interest persuade and force the public office holders to behave ethically. Thus, it could

be said that by carrying out their governmental functions and tasks in an ethical way meet the public interest.

Usually the public interest is commonly related with the position of public servants to give honest and intrepid information to ministers, including advice that can discourage the ministers (Williams, 1998, p.18). This should be conducted in ethical standard in which the benefit of the public is at a high priority. This means that ethical values such as honor, benevolence, and honesty lead the heart and mind of the public servants in advising the ministers. At certain stage, perhaps, there is a limitation of the minister in capturing the real picture in the public interest. He or she only considers the interest of the need of a certain constituent or a certain group of people. In many governments arena, for example in Indonesia, ministers, governors, and mayors so often make decisions and policies that ignore the public interest. This occurs because there is a small space for public servants to advice to these senior officials. The patron-client relationship model still overwhelms the governmental arena in Indonesia.

Public interest can persuade and encourage public office holders/administrators to promote essential values of ethics such as honesty, liberty, property, honor, and equality (Morgan, 1994, p.142). In the governmental arena these values are crucial because all stakeholders are in the same positions in creating the well-being for citizens. Administrators or public sector through ethical attitude and behavior will create and maintain the trust from other stakeholders in a constructive collaboration. Otherwise, if they avoid the ethical values it will decrease the confidence of other stakeholders and citizens as well. In addition, perhaps, it could be said that public interest is a part of a governmental vision in creating welfare for citizens. In addition, perhaps, it could be said that public interest is a part of a governmental vision in creating welfare for citizens. The vision is a grand picture and the public interest is an instrument for governments to implement this vision through missions, programs, and activities. In this token, the public interest will indicate it the governmental activities are on the right track for meeting the public needs or vice versa. Therefore, "Holders of public office should take decision solely in terms of public interest. They should not so in order to gain financial or other material benefits for themselves, their family or their friends. They have a duty to declare any private interests relating to their public duties and to take steps to resolve any conflicts arising in a way that protects the public interests (Committee on Standards in Public life, 1995, p.14)."

Public interest's contribution to public sector governance and good democratic government

The notion of public interest contributes positively to the public sector governance and good democratic government. Hence, it could be considered that public interest is a parameter if the public sector governance and democratic government are doing well or vice versa. Public governance pays maximum attention to how different stakeholders and citizens collaborate in creating and enhancing a better level of their outcomes (Bovaird and Loffler, 2003, p.8). These outcomes cannot be achieved if they work partially. Moreover, the outcomes depict and make the public interest become a reality. It could be argued that outcomes cannot exist without public interest. In essence, public interest gets more favor in the governance model compared to the Weberian bureaucratic model and New Public Management.

Public sector governance only presents in a good (mature democratic government) such as New Zealand, Australia and Canada. It does not exist in undemocratic governments but is growing in new

(transitional) democratic governments such as Indonesia, Philippines, and Timor Leste. Good democratic governments cannot be separated from the public interests because their existence is to create and enhance the well-being of the people. However they cannot do it by themselves alone, governments possess limitations for example, human resources, funding, and equipment. Meanwhile other stakeholders including citizens have limitations too. Thus, through good and strong cooperation they will supply each other according to their role and potentials that they have. In this context, there is broad space for stakeholders and citizens to carry out governance activities together with the public sector.

The increasing involvement of stakeholders and citizens is positive but all actors should be cautious to some of ethical problems. Seal and Jones (1997) conclude about the extension of trust-based in actors' relationship that "The positive image of trust that emerges from the literature is based on an implicit assumption that trusting relationships are somehow welfare enhancing. Less obvious are the negative aspects of trust - trust between members of self-serving elites which may flourish within bureaucracies that are located in town halls or Communist Parties (1997, p.7)." It is obvious that the negative aspects where there is cooperation among elites to fulfill their own vested-interest could harm the public interest and also the collaboration with other stakeholders. Based on my anecdotal experience, this negative aspect still occurs widely in many local governments in Indonesia.

Public interest hopefully will lead all actors in the governance arena to put their own interest behind the public needs. This is important but it cannot overcome all the problems by itself. However at least public interest will lead governments to think seriously to create a bureaucracy that can meet the public needs. At the same time, the private sectors and volunteer sectors also carry out their tasks and functions to fulfill public interest. Public interest helps actors the public need in priority. Furthermore, focusing the appropriate energy, funding and equipment in conducting the activities based on the priority scale. The law enforcement, leadership, a robust bureaucracy, healthy civil associations, and good private sectors are basic components in a democratic government. When these elements operate properly then public sector governance can work properly too. However, there are possibilities to breach the law or conducting a wrong action that is not covered by legal frame work. Hence, ethics management is important to control and prevent the governance process and mechanism from unethical behavior and abuse of public resources (Davis, 2003, p.220).

Conclusion

Theoretically (classical perspective), the concept of public interests is unclear, blurred and vague. But operationally public interest really exists. Even the public interest is a focal point of governments' policies. Thus, it could be said that it is impossible in a democratic government to formulate a policy without considering the public interest. In other words, governments cannot create and enhance citizens' well-being if they avoid the public interest.

Public interest provides a way for ethical standards for the public office holders. It is like a mirror where the administrators/bureaucrats and politicians reflect their governmental activities. They can see if their activities are meeting the public interest or moving toward their vested interest. Public interest supports public office holders to perform based on ethical values so they can meet the public need. In certain stage, based on public interest, public servants can give honest and intrepid information to the senior officer and ministers that perhaps they are reluctant to accept.

Public interest contributes positively to the public governance and democratic governments. Through public interest governments can attain desired outcomes that meet the need of the public. By adhering to public interest governments making policies and implementing them. Avoiding public interest will harm the popularity of the government in the eyes of citizens. However, in undemocratic countries it seems like the public interest is ignored seriously by the government. That is why public governance cannot exist as well as in the democratic arena. Ethics plays crucial role in public governance in creating and maintaining the trust amongst stakeholders and citizens.

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