

Opinion: Public Policy doesn't just have jobs. It has careers

Public policy promises not comfort but relevance, offering no fixed ladder but adaptive, impactful, purpose-driven careers that evolve with society and the state in the 21st century

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Every year, hundreds of young graduates enter public policy classrooms across India carrying equal parts hope and unease. Hope, because public policy promises proximity to power, intellectual engagement, and the opportunity to contribute to nation-building. Unease, because they quickly encounter a familiar refrain from seniors, relatives, and sometimes even well-meaning academics: “Public policy has jobs, but not a career.”

Delivered as advice, it often lands as a warning. Beneath it lies a deeper question: Does [public policy](#) offer only short-term roles, or is this belief a myth shaped by our limited imagination of what a career should look like? The anxiety is understandable in a society that still equates success with stability, linear progression, and institutional permanence. Public policy, with its short-term contracts, shifting titles, and cross-sector mobility, appears to defy this expectation. Many early-career roles in think tanks, NGOs, foundations, and even government advisory units are project-based or fixed-term. Titles change quickly, vertical mobility can seem opaque, and lateral movement becomes common.

For families accustomed to traditional career narratives, this fluidity feels risky. The conclusion often follows that policy may provide work, but not a lifelong profession. Yet this view frequently mistakes organisational structure for professional substance.

A Young Profession Judged by Old Standards

Public policy as a professional field outside the [civil services](#) is still relatively young in India. Unlike medicine, law, engineering, or the bureaucracy, it lacks a single, clearly demarcated ladder where one starts as a junior and retires at the top. There is no universally recognised “partner track” or uniform promotional hierarchy. Instead, policy careers can look fragmented — consultant here, fellow there, project manager somewhere else — , shaped by funding cycles, [political](#) transitions, and shifting priorities.

But judging public policy by the standards of much older professions is misleading. Those fields had decades, even centuries, to institutionalise career pathways. Public policy is evolving alongside a rapidly changing state that increasingly relies on external expertise.

Central ministries, State governments, city administrations, regulatory bodies, multilateral agencies, philanthropic foundations, consulting firms, political parties, and civil society organisations all now require policy talent. Urban governance, climate action, digital public infrastructure, health systems, [education](#) reform, social protection, and gender policy are no longer peripheral concerns; they are central to governance and growth. What appears like instability is often a field still in formation, not a profession without a future.

Jobs Are Visible, Careers Are Built Over Time

Policy careers are rarely built within a single organisation. They are constructed across institutions, sectors, and levels of governance. A professional may move from a State government advisory role to a multilateral agency, then to a research think tank, and later to a political consulting firm. To an outsider, this looks like job-hopping. In reality, it is career-building through the accumulation of experience, networks, and domain expertise. A career is not defined by staying in one place; it is characterised by a coherent purpose and the progression of responsibility over time.

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A helpful way to understand this is through the policy cycle itself. Agenda setting, **policy formulation**, implementation, monitoring, and evaluation are usually taught as stages of policymaking, but they are also distinct career pathways. Some professionals build careers shaping agendas through research, advocacy, and public debate. Others specialise in design and formulation within governments or consultancies.

Many find long-term roles in implementation, working closely with state capacity and service delivery. Monitoring and evaluation offer another trajectory, rooted in data, accountability, and learning. Seen this way, public policy does not lack careers; it provides multiple, overlapping ones that together make up the policy ecosystem.

Why the Career Path Feels Unclear

Part of the issue is that careers in public policy are rarely linear. They are cyclical, much like the policy process itself. Professionals often move from implementation to design, from evaluation to advisory roles, or from research into government and back again. To those expecting a straight promotional ladder, this movement seems like a drift. In reality, it reflects the accumulation of policy capital: experience across different stages of the policy cycle, sectors, and scales.

India is still learning how to formally recognise and reward this kind of professional growth outside **bureaucratic** hierarchies. Unlike countries where policy professionals routinely rotate between government, academia, and industry with institutional recognition, India is still building this architecture. Until it fully matures, mid-career professionals must actively shape their trajectories rather than inherit them. This can feel uncomfortable, but it is a transition in a maturing field, not a structural weakness.

Skills, Not Labels, Sustain Careers

Ultimately, long-term careers in public policy are anchored in skills rather than job titles. Transferable capabilities: policy analysis, data literacy, programme design, stakeholder management, political economy understanding, writing, communication, travel across organisations and sectors. Professionals who continuously sharpen these skills remain employable and influential regardless of institutional shifts. The strongest policy careers combine domain depth with functional strength. Careers

stagnate not because policy lacks opportunities, but because individuals stop investing in their own skill evolution while the field continues to change.

Policy schools and institutions also shape this narrative. Too often, they train students for their first job rather than for a 20-year professional journey. Career conversations focus on placements, not pathways. Students graduate knowing where they might start, but not how they might grow. Normalising non-linear careers, showcasing alum trajectories across decades, and investing in mentorship, mid-career fellowships, and executive education are essential if public policy careers are to feel more coherent and less precarious.

The idea that public policy has jobs but not a career is ultimately more myth than reality, though it is a myth rooted in outdated expectations of stability and linear progression. Public policy does not offer a single, predictable ladder. What it offers instead is something more suited to the 21st century: adaptive, impactful, and purpose-driven careers that evolve with the state and society.

The real question is not whether public policy offers a career, but whether we are prepared for jobs that demand agency, learning, and reinvention. For those seeking certainty, policy may feel unsettling. For those seeking meaning, influence, and intellectual engagement, it offers one of the richest professional landscapes available today.

Public policy does not promise comfort. It promises relevance. And in a country grappling with complex challenges, from rapid [urbanisation](#) to deep inequality, that relevance is not a temporary job. It is a lifelong career in the making.



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