

Policy Implementation

As Parsons points out, policy-making does not come to an end once a policy is set out or approved. In effect, policy-making continues throughout the implementation, administration and evaluation phases. Recognition of this fact reinforces emerging approaches that emphasise convergence and sharing of roles and responsibilities between politics and the bureaucracy. It is now acknowledged that the bureaucracy and service providers can have a profound impact on the effectiveness of policy. Going further, many authors are now suggesting that bureaucrats, and in particular those on the 'front-line' of service delivery, can and should have a significant role in the application and development of policies. Examination of policy 'implementation' as a discrete area of study is now recognised to be of critical importance.

Elmore's Approaches to Implementation Analysis

Elmore provides a useful overview of key implementation issues and suggests that there are at least two clearly distinguishable approaches to implementation analysis:

- Forward mapping
- Backward mapping

Forward Mapping

Forward mapping in policy implementation begins at the top of the process. The policy maker defines as clear a statement of intent as possible and proceeds through a sequence of increasingly more specific steps to outline what is expected of implementers at each level below. At the bottom of the process, the policy maker states, again with as much precision as possible, what a satisfactory outcome would be, measured in terms of the original statement of intent.

This process begins with an objective, it elaborates an increasingly specific set of steps for achieving that objective, and it states an outcome against which success or failure can be measured. Essentially forward mapping works on the same logic as that underpinning various policy cycle models.

Underlying Assumptions

Forward mapping approaches emphasise the need for hierarchical relationships and suggest that the closer one is to the source of the policy, the greater is one's authority and influence. It is assumed that the ability of complex systems to respond to problems depends on the establishment of clear lines of authority and control.

Solutions emphasised by forward mapping stress factors that tend to centralise control and that are easily manipulated by policy makers - funding formulas, formal organisational structures, authority relationships among administrative units, regulations, and

POAD8014: Public Policy

administrative controls (budgets, planning, evaluation requirements). In short, this method relies primarily on formal devices of command and control that centralise authority.

Elmore's Critique of Forward Mapping

The most serious problem with forward mapping is its implicit and unquestioned assumption that policymakers control the organisational, political, and technological processes that affect implementation.

By assuming that more explicit policy directives, greater attention to administrative responsibilities, and clearer statements of intended outcomes will improve implementation, forward mapping reinforces the myth that implementation is controlled from the top.

Backward Mapping

Backward mapping explicitly questions the assumption that policymakers ought to, or do, exercise the determinant influence over what happens in the implementation process. It begins not at the top of the implementation process but at the last possible stage, the point at which administrative actions intersect with private choices. It begins not with a statement of intent, but with a statement of the specific behaviour at the lowest level of the implementation process that generates the need for policy.

Implementation is seen to be based upon a problem, rather than on an objective. Policy is not assumed to be only, or even the major, influence on the behaviour of people engaged in the process. Success is in all respects conditional and predicated on an estimate of the limited ability of actors at one level of the implementation process to influence the behaviour of actors at other levels.

Underlying Assumptions

Unlike forward mapping, backward mapping approaches suggest that the closer one is to the source of the problem, the greater is one's ability to influence it. The problem-solving ability of complex systems is seen to depend not on hierarchical control, but on maximising discretion at the point where the problem is most immediate.

Solutions emphasised by backward mapping stress the dispersal of control and factors that can only be indirectly influenced by policymakers - the knowledge and problem-solving ability of lower-level administrators, incentive structures that operate on the subjects of policy, bargaining relationships among political actors at various levels of the implementation process, and the strategic use of funds to affect discretionary choices

This method relies primarily on informal devices of delegation and discretion that disperse authority.

Forward and Backward Mapping Contrasted

Characteristic	Forward Mapping	Backward Mapping
Logic	top-down	bottom-up
Action	sequential	variable
Style	hierarchical	discretionary
Solutions	command and control	dispersal of control

Elmore's Elaboration of Backward Mapping in Practice

In the past, economists, impatient with the complexities of bureaucracy and the lack of precision in organisational theory, have tried to reduce implementation analysis to a choice between market and non-market mechanisms. This perspective diverts attention away from the problem of how to use the structure and process of organizations to elaborate, specify and define policies.

It is important to recognise what Elmore calls the 'reciprocal nature of authority relations' as it applies to formal and informal authority. Formal authority travels from top to bottom of organizations, but informal authority that derives from expertise, skill and proximity to the essential tasks that an organization performs travels in the opposite direction. People lower down in organisations have particular expertise that can be utilised if they are given the discretion to use it.

The notion of delegated discretion recognises that there is merit in pushing responsibilities that require special expertise and proximity to a problem down in the organisation, leaving more generalised responsibilities at the top. Strong hierarchical controls work against this reciprocity.

Complexity of Joint Action

Elmore points out that there is an inverse relationship between the number of transactions required to implement a decision and the likelihood that an effect, any effect, will result. The cumulative product of a large number of transactions is an extraordinarily low probability of success. This suggests that complexity of implementation processes is a serious problem for policy analysts and policy makers.

This issue is difficult to deal with using a model where implementation is seen as a hierarchically ordered set of authority relationships. The tighter the hierarchical control, the greater the number of checks and decision points required to ensure compliance, the more opportunities for diversion and delay, the greater the reliance of subordinates on superiors for guidance, and the lower the reliance on individual judgment and problem-solving ability. From our earlier exploration we can see that forward mapping would tend to reinforce such pathologies of hierarchy.

Bardach has suggested a possible solution through a process of what he calls 'fixing' - the skilful and selective intervention of policymakers at various points in the implementation process. It must be noted, however, that this approach is limited. 'Fixing' is a kind of behaviour not an analytic strategy.

Street-level Discretion

Distrust of discretion is deeply ingrained in conventional theories of administration and government. Discretion is usually carefully bounded, contained and controlled by an assortment of devices (monitoring, routines) that strengthen the top of the system against the bottom. The application of discretion from this perspective is likely to imply that if left to their own devices front-line or street-level staff will thwart, twist and subvert the aims of policymakers. Compliance with orders and procedures displaces competence.

However, standardised solutions, developed at great distance from the problem, are notoriously unreliable and very inflexible. There is little or no room for the exercise of skills, judgment, invention or experimentation. Despite this, little attention is given to the possibility that it may be possible to capitalise on discretion as a device for improving the reliability and effectiveness of policies at the street level. Variability and discretion at the delivery level can just as easily be viewed as an asset - a broad-based body of data on unanticipated, adaptive responses to highly specialised problems.

Coalitions and the Creation of Bargaining Arenas

Early implementation research found that the effect of policy depends critically upon the formation of local coalitions of individuals affected by the policy. Unless the initiators of a policy can galvanise the energy, attention, and skills of those affected by it, thereby bringing them into a loosely structured 'bargaining arena', the effects of a policy are unlikely to be anything but weak and diffuse.

The benefits of a policy need to be made intelligible and tangible to the proposed beneficiaries and the process needs to remain flexible enough to allow local bargaining and input. Lower order or street-level bureaucrats are a critical group in this context. If a policy is to be implemented successfully then all staff within the organisation need to understand it thoroughly to be able to implement it effectively.

Conditions for Effective Implementation

Sabatier and Mazmanian were early exponents of the importance of implementation analysis. Their work endeavoured to synthesise the ideas of both top-down and bottom-up theorists into a set of six sufficient and necessary conditions for the effective implementation of stated policy objectives.

- clear and consistent objectives (focus point for evaluation)
- adequate causal theory (reason for the change)

POAD8014: Public Policy

- legal and accountable implementation structures
- committed and skilful implementers with discretionary power
- support of interest groups
- stable socio-economic conditions

This model and variations of it have been applied in a wide range of countries and contexts. However, Parsons points out that implementation takes place in a specific context in terms of the values and institutions involved in a given problem. Perhaps what is needed is a mapping process which offers the possibility of understanding the multiple dimensions of knowledge, beliefs, power, meaning and values which frame policy-making and implementation.

Althaus, Bridgman and Davis summarise the key lessons from the literature on successful implementation as follows:

- *All policies are built on implicit theories about the world and how it operates. If these theories are mistaken about cause and effect, the policy will fail. If, on the other hand, the model is simple, robust and tested through experience, then a policy can prevail*
- *Policy development should include as few steps as possible between formation and implementation. The more complex the policy sequence, the more likely misunderstanding or competition will arise with deleterious effects*
- *Timing is everything - implementation schedules must pay attention to the electoral cycle*
- *Policies frequently fail if responsibility is shared among too many players. This is particularly a problem in federal systems. As more agencies become involved, the complexity of coordination overwhelms the original policy intent. A successful policy therefore will be implemented by just one, or at most, a small number of agencies*
- *There must be a clear chain of accountability. One person or agency must have responsibility for the success of the program, and a capacity to intervene when implementation runs into difficulties.*
- *Those who deliver a program should be involved in policy design. 'Street level bureaucrats' - the people who provide the service to customers - must be informed, enthusiastic and cooperative if a program is to work*
- *Continuous evaluation is crucial if a policy is to evolve and become more effective. Numerous studies have shown that ambitious programs which appeared after a few years to be abject failures received more favourable evaluations when seen in a longer time frame; conversely, initial successes may evaporate over time*
- *Measurement is essential. The test for success must be specified in advance, and be capable of robust assessment*
- *Policy makers should pay as much attention to implementation as to policy formation. Implementation cannot be divorced from policy. There is no point having good ideas if they cannot be carried out.*

(quoted from Althaus, Bridgman & Davis, 2013, p. 176-7)

References

Althaus, C., Bridgman, P. & Davis, G. 2013, *The Australian Policy Handbook*, 5th ed, Allen & Unwin, Sydney.

Elmore, R.F. 1979. 'Backward Mapping: Implementation Research and Policy Decision', *Political Science Quarterly*, 94, 4, pp. 601-14.

Parsons, W. 1995, *Public Policy: An introduction to the theory and practice of policy analysis*, Edward Elgar, London, Section 4.3, 'Implementation', pp. 461-90.

Sabatier, P.A. 1986, 'Top-Down and Bottom-Up Approaches to Implementation Research: a Critical Analysis and Suggested Synthesis', *Journal of Public Policy*, 6, 1, pp. 21-48.