

Why is policy implementation so difficult?

The importance and complexities of policy implementation are well known in the 21st century however, this has not always been the case. Policy analysis in the early 1960's focused primarily on the 'front end' stages of the policy process, with implementation largely a neglected, background issue. By drawing attention to policy failures at the implementation stage, it was hoped that policymakers could learn from them. This essay will answer the question as to why policy implementation is so difficult, using the Economic Development Administration (EDA) project in Oakland as a central case study. This essay will also draw on additional cases in Nigeria and the UK. First, this essay will outline three definitions, beginning with Pressman and Wildavsky's, before moving on to Mazmanian and Sabatier's top-down perspective, finishing with Van Meter and Van Horn's bottom-up definition. This essay will seek to stress the importance that definition plays in the implementation process, particularly at 'street-level' where discretion or principal-agency is often a feature of implementation. The varied characteristics of top-down and bottom-up implementation will be explored and the roles they have in the early and late stages of the policy and implementation process will be analysed, assessing the advantages and disadvantages of both perspectives. An important central question of this essay is; to what extent are formal institutions and public policies also affected by path-dependence and what does this mean for implementation? The inherent problems of measuring progress, and factors that are outside a decision maker's control will be highlighted, along with the solutions that New Public Management (NPM) can offer. Finally, this essay will conclude with some core issues that make implementation so difficult and some concise lessons for effective implementation on a broad range of policies. Whilst highlighting this is not an exhaustive list of reasons, and some cases fail at the implementation stage for varying reasons, highlighting the fact that not all cases are the same.

Definitions are critical to understanding the attributes of each perspective. Implementation is most commonly described as the process of turning policy in practice. How a bureaucrat or decision maker begins and carries out the process of implementation largely depends on how they define implementation, or to which perspective they ascribe to. The first definition this essay considers is that of Pressman and Wildavsky defined implementation as 'to carry out, accomplish, fulfil, produce, complete' (Pressman and Wildavsky, 1984, p.xxi). They also point to an important question; how do we distinguish between a policy and its implementation? (Pressman and Wildavsky, 1984, p.xxi). This definition expresses the role of public servants in the government system to provide efficient and just services to citizens. A second definition is that of Mazmanian and Sabatier who offer a top-down perspective by stating that 'Implementation is carrying out of a basic policy decision, usually incorporated in a statute but which can also take the form of important executive orders or court decisions' (Mazmanian and Sabatier, 1983, p.21). Finally, Van Meter and Van Horn from a bottom-up perspective describe implementation as 'Those actions by public or private individuals (or groups) that are directed at the achievement of objectives set forth in prior policy decisions' (Meter and Horn, 1975, p.447-8).

Policy analysis neglected the 'rear end' of policy-making (the implementation stage) with an over focus at the top end, which brought many problems to the fore such as; methodological problems, and problems about the extent to which the very practical concerns of implementation studies may involve, explicitly or implicitly, including identification with actor's views of what should happen (Hill and Varone, 2017, p.228). For deLeon & deLeon (2001), this 'first wave' of implementation focused solely on addressing the gaps between policy

formulation and execution (deLeon and deLeon, 2002). Which were only partially successful. Sarbaugh-Thompson and Zald (1995) indeed argued that these first-generation studies which saw implementation success or failure, as a function of flawed, or imperfect primary legislation and a failure of bureaucratic compliance (Schofield, 2001, p.249). The top down approach itself is built on two related assumptions: Descriptive, where decisions are made at the 'top' (by central government or the legislature) then are carried out at the 'bottom' (by implementing organisations (Cairney, 2012, p.37), and prescriptive, which holds that decisions should be made at the top and carried out at the bottom (Cairney, 2012, p.37). There was a presence of significant implementation gaps in both perspectives, implementation gaps can be identified by the differences between the expectations of policymakers and the actual policy outcomes (Cairney, 2012, p.34). The presence of these gaps has led to the deepening of implementation studies, and a combination of the two perspectives later in the 1990s.

In their formative publication in the early 1970s, Pressman and Wildavsky accepted that the policy process was unidirectional, and they drew conclusion that policy was formulated by policymakers at the top and then carried out by bureaucrats at implementation stage. Pressman and Wildavsky identified that implementation of the EDA would be difficult right from the beginning. Key issues involved the emergence of unexpected decisions, and the necessity of two decision paths in order to achieve the EDA program goals; and within each path, the agency found that the number of decisions and clearances required was constantly growing (Pressman and Wildavsky, 1973, p.112). These additional issues required decisions had not initially been a part of the EDAs plans, policymakers had only one goal, to reduce unemployment. The two decision paths required; financing the construction of the works, and developing a hiring plan that involved African-American workers. Even if these two decision paths had been included in the original policy, it is still unclear as to whether the failure of the project could have been avoided. In this case, there was no study or inclusion into the policy implementation process of bottom-up actors, even the factoring of unintended consequences as Pressman and Wildavsky have discussed was limited in the initial policy. In addition to these concerns, the workers consulted in this process would become active actors themselves, and the implementers of policy would be using their discretion. Whilst Browne and Wildavsky (1983) later recognise multi-causal interactive patterns (Browne and Wildavsky, 1983, p.233). Discretion is not fully studied in their work at the time.

The second case considered is that of the National Policy on Education which was formed in Nigeria in 1977, this case set in a developing country is in stark contrast to other cases put forward in this essay. Dr.Ikechukwu and Chukwuemeka identify the obstacles to effective implementation in Nigeria in their paper titled, the obstacles to effective policy implementation by the public bureaucracy in developing nations: The case of Nigeria. The National Policy on Education was formulated to achieve the objective of acquiring appropriate skill and competence, both mental and physical, as equipment for an individual to live in and contribute to the development of Nigerian society (Ikechukwu Ugwuanyi and Chukwuemeka, 2013). Whilst Nigeria has indeed made vast progress in terms of the number of children in primary education UNESCO concluded that more remains to be done in both quantity and quality (Irigoyen, 2017). The initial formulation process in 1977 was largely focused on the top end of the implementation process, which was determined by previous educational policies and culture, this path dependency has continued into the present. UNESCO found that the quality of the national school curriculum is undermined by the generally low quality of teachers who implement it, which translates into low levels of learning achievement (Irigoyen, 2017). Similar to the Oakland case study, stakeholder and was found to be weak. There was no evidence

of communication or consultations between institutions at the federal and state level in the design of the Universal Basic Education programme, which led to misalignment later in the implementation phase (Irigoyen, 2017).

Inferior communication and consultation between the federal and state institutions, creates problems with funding allocations internally from state to state. As is the case in Oakland there is a sizeable implementation gap between what was formulated, and what was implemented. Such a case differs markedly with the two others depicted in this essay. The locality, culture, political, economic, and social situations in any country must be taken into account in the policy process, particularly at the implementation stage. For this reason, comparing developing countries with those developed is not appropriate.

Hindering implementation was the National Policy on Education is over focus on state agencies, which do not possess the requisite manpower and financial resources to effectively implement them. Despite the teachers being implementers of the policy, there was no initial consideration to include them in the implementation process. However, finances could play an influential role here. As Ikelegbe (2006) and Dick (2003) state that the national government, sometimes, do not budget adequately, not enabling the public bureaucracy to properly implement formulated policies (Ikechukwu Ugwuanyi and Chukwuemeka, 2013). The reason for this lack of bottom-up consideration could in part be down to how the Nigerian government defines public policy implementation, and to the extent Nigerian institutions are path dependent. Nigeria having only gained independence from Britain in 1960, took time to develop its own educational system and faces a number of political and economic challenges. Prior to 1977, Nigeria operated an educational policy inherited from Britain at independence (Irigoyen, 2017). Under colonial rule the educational policy of Nigeria was fixed, with very limited interaction from those implementing the policy. Path dependence holds that when a commitment has been established and resources devoted to it, over time it produces 'increasing returns' and it becomes increasingly costly to choose a different path (Cairney, 2012, p.127 citing Pierson, 2000). This is clearly demonstrable in this case, with policymakers often unwilling or unable to diverge.

By focusing on implementing policy from the top-down, the Nigerian government has neglected to factor in discretion and ambiguity that street-level bureaucrats such as teachers, and head teachers implement. The National Policy on Education is exceptionally ambiguous with regards to how bureaucrats at the base level should implement policy. Irigoyen, argues that there is no clarity on the management structures and guidelines for the programme's delivery (Irigoyen, 2017). This is a considerable problem when implementing policy in such a location, although additionally the challenge of keeping away personal interest, prejudice and the influence of early values in the conduct of official business by bureaucrats is equally very critical in Nigeria (Ikechukwu Ugwuanyi and Chukwuemeka, 2013). Self-interest can also affect policy at any stage, as Dr. Ikechukwu and Chukwuemeka note it is observable that each new political leadership in Nigeria is usually and primarily concerned with making its own impression on public programmes and projects (Ikechukwu Ugwuanyi and Chukwuemeka, 2013). Nigeria also operates under ineffective and corrupt political leadership (Ikechukwu Ugwuanyi and Chukwuemeka, 2013). Leadership corruption, and ineptitude, for instance, affects the content and quality of policy at formulation stage (Ikechukwu Ugwuanyi and Chukwuemeka, 2013). If policy is botched at the formulation stage a successful implementation is even less likely, regardless of how involved bottom up actors are. All such considerations make this particular policy hard to implement in Nigeria.

If a policy passes through the formulation stage effectively. Many bottom up theorists would then argue that if local level implementers are not given the freedom to adapt to local conditions, then it is likely that the policy will fail at the implementation stage (Matland, 1995). Matland's statement is case dependent. This freedom to adapt would only come from implementers at the base being fully included into the implementation process with low-ambiguity. Implementer's face two important issues that they may have to use their discretion to tackle in this case or may have been using; social and cultural barriers are hindering both female participation and the lack of enforcement of the UBE Act 2004 on enrolment and retention (Irigoyen, 2017). Elements such as the lack of basic training, the lack of communication, coordination and consultation with these base level implementers led to low levels of learning and achievement, and high levels of discretion as implementers have tried to offset these problems with little governmental oversight. Low-ambiguity is essential to effective implementation in this case. It is worth noting that implementers may also suffer cognitive limitations that decision makers do. When they become the implementers they become decision maker, the implementer may suffer bounded rationality.

In the 1998 edition of the National Policy on Education it gave specific provision for policy makers and implementers, recommending the establishment of the State Agency for Mass Education (SAME) (Irigoyen, 2017). This specific provision was expected to provide some solution to these issues and lower ambiguity at street level. However, the culture and path dependency within schools and other Nigerian institutions, mean the increasing governmental oversight and lower policy-means ambiguity are likely the only options to correct the government's initial failure in implementing this particular policy at its initial implementation. This is an example of path dependence hampering future policy amendments, history matters in implementation, this is especially true of such inceptive highly ambiguous policies. Irigoyen finds the structural alignment of institutions at the national level is not strong, with several organisations overlapping, or with unclear management objectives (Irigoyen, 2017). With these unclear management objectives and increasingly overlapping organisations ambiguity will be high.

Self-interest is present at every stage of the policy process. Politicians may want to be seen to be in favour of certain ideals or goals while actually doing nothing about them (Hill and Varone, 2017, p.232). As highlighted by both the Oakland case study and the National Policy of Education case of 1977 in Nigeria. The self-interests of the principal (elected officials and institutions) and the agent (the bureaucrat, who is tasked with implementation) are potentially divergent. This is the case in Oakland and even the case of rail privatisation in the UK. Where actors (British Rail managers) opportunity networked in the implementation process in order to secure additional resources. As Grantham states these managers, after early objections to the form of the privatization, then collaborated fully in the process with some of them becoming wealthy as a result (Grantham, 2001). Where the resource is financial, actors manoeuvre to secure those additional resources for themselves subject to an evaluation of transaction costs (Grantham, 2001). As implementers of passenger transport authority policy, the managers were low-discretion actors in administrative networks, however their own financial knowledge and informational resources were substantial (Grantham, 2001).

Later academic studies have avoided taking either extreme positions. Saetren (2014) points to the 'the gradual silencing of the protracted and unproductive debate between top-down and bottom-up scholars' (Saetren, 2014, p.95). It is this later position that the UK case of rail privatisation takes up, in many ways it is more of a balance between top-down and bottom-up perspectives. New Public Management (NPM) sought to tackle the implementation 'gaps'

in the public sector, which the Oakland and Nigeria case are examples of. NPM rose to the fore in the early 1980s under UK Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher and US President Ronald Reagan. The central state was perceived as 'overloaded', monitoring, oversight and performance management (through the use of targets) needed to be increased, and the discretion of public sector professionals had to be reduced. The promotion of internal markets and term contracts are a feature of this perspective, which are justified as having 'rivalry as the key to lower costs and better standards; contracts as the key to explicating performance standards' (Hood, 1995, p.96). Whereas traditional top-down and bottom up frameworks tend to give only a partial explanation of outcomes, NPM sought to measure and monitor outcomes (Grantham, 2001). NPM provides solutions to inherent problems of measuring progress that earlier perspectives tended to neglect.

For Grantham, the successful delivery of this policy depended largely on activity located in a series of distinct implementation networks, they were only a feature of the transition to privatisation (Grantham, 2001). The NPM framework was evident through the implementation period, with grants and direct handouts from the Treasury. The establishment of competitive contracts for private rail operators (a public service), was expected to lower costs simultaneously and was the core perception of improved policy. For NPM supporters, the use of performance indicators, targets and new technology allow for more even more effective implementation. However, NPM does have significant disadvantages, for which the paradigm faces significant criticism for at present. One is that public servants are wasteful, to which opponents of NPM blame accuse it of demoralising the public sector. Arguments are made by supporters that stress the 'need to cut direct costs, raise labour discipline, and to do more with less' (Hood, 1995, p.96). Whilst offering an alternative at present it is a deeply contested paradigm, for varying reasons that are beyond the scope of this essay.

One key theme present in all three cases presented is that of unintended outcomes. This is true of the implementation process as a whole. As former US Secretary of Defence stated 'we also know there are known unknowns; that is to say we know there are some things we do not know. But there are also unknown unknowns – the ones we don't know we don't know. And if one looks throughout the history of our country and other free countries, it is the latter category that tend to be the difficult ones' (Federal News Service Inc., 2002). The task for policymakers is to anticipate and prepare for unintended outcomes in the early stages of the policymaking process. Implementation failure from unintended outcomes can be mitigated by learning from similar past cases, and anticipation by having funds, and manpower aside for any unintended consequence. For example, an unintended consequence of the later 2004 over focus on secondary education and skills for the workplace led to the decrease by 4% for primary level enrolment education in Nigeria (Irigoyen, 2017).

It is often very difficult to know if a policy failure is due to poor policy formulation, to an imperfect policy implementation or to a subtle mix of both elements (Hill and Varone, 2017, p.229). Hogwood and Gunn (1984) attribute implementation failure to three main factors: bad execution, bad policy, and bad luck (Hogwood and Gunn, 1984, p.197). Cairney (2012) suggests that the implementation gap is wide because participants have unrealistic expectations (Cairney, 2012, p.34). This essay has so far shown that most of the statements are correct, however, there are many variables that cause implementation to fail and these are largely case dependent.

This essay has shown that the distance between, implementers and the policy formulators is critical to successful implementation. The deeply complex and contested policy arena makes

it harder to design effective policy, this bears directly into the implementation process. Politics, culture, economics, location are huge factors that influence the implementation process even in relatively stable developed countries, output is unpredictable.

It is important to note that this essay is only outlining three case studies. Each case involves different political incentives, goals, and expectations, amongst a wide array of other factors. Each of the different variables affect implementation cases to a greater or lesser degree. Most implementation studies are Western focused, this essay has tried to buck that trend with the inclusion of Nigeria. As the Nigeria case study proves path dependence, locality and culture play a significant part in determining whether the policy goals are met. Implementers may also suffer the issue of bounded rationality.

Self-interest and discretion affects implementation in the three cases in this essay. It is reasonably safe to assume these two variable have to be taken into account in all cases. NPM provides an opportunity for performance measurement that other perspectives do not, however, it does have its own disadvantages. This essay has come to the conclusion that learning from all perspectives is the best solution, as is finding a balance. Whilst it is clear that implementation contains many pitfalls, they can be mitigated against.

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