Critical dimensions for policy implementation

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ABSTRACT

Implementing any policy or making an intervention faces a range of challenges, especially for those endeavouring to benefit the poorest social groups. Policies are influenced by the contexts in which they are developed such as the content of the policy, the nature of the policy process, the actors involved in the formulation process and implementation. The purpose of this article is to describe and explain the dimensions of policy implementation through which the dynamic components of policy development and implementation can be explained and analysed. Therefore, a comprehensive literature review was conducted to arrive at an understanding of the theoretical approaches to policy implementation and the factors that act as barriers to effective implementation. For the implementation process to be improved, policy implementers must consider a number of factors associated with policy implementation. The article locates the dimensions of policy implementation within the wider policy literature and describes why each component of the dimension is important for effective policy implementation. The article concludes by arguing that a supportive policy environment can be regarded as one of the cornerstones of improved and effective policy implementation.

INTRODUCTION

The process of public policy-making in the national sphere of government for the implementation of the policy in the local sphere is long and unsteady. Policies are influenced by the contexts in which they are developed. Such contexts include historical, cultural, social, economic and diverse conceptual dimensions operating at international, regional, country and local levels (spheres). These forces influence policy development as well as policy implementation.

The main thrust of research in the area of public policy implementation has been to analyse the problems of implementing public policy. Thus, what accounts for the differential success of public policies in the implementation process? This is important because *how* one

defines the implementation problem shapes both the analysis of key issues in the process and the recommendations that result from the analysis. If the implementation problem is incorrectly defined in a model, the results of any analysis that uses this model will be flawed. Thus it is important to examine the practical experience of the implementation problem. Doing so will result in implementation research that provides a better understanding of the process (Brynard 2006:359; Bhuyan, Jorgensen & Sharma 2010:1).

Different factors influence policy development and implementation, such as the content of the policy, the nature of the policy process, the actors involved in the process, and the context in which the policy is designed and implemented. Consequently, a comprehensive literature review was conducted to obtain an overview of the theoretical approaches to policy implementation and the factors that act as barriers to effective implementation. The purpose of this article is to describe and explain the dimensions of policy implementation through which the dynamic components of policy development and implementation can be understood and analysed. The article locates the dimensions of policy implementation within the wider policy literature and explains why each component of the dimension is important for effective policy implementation. The article concludes by arguing that a supportive policy environment is one of the cornerstones of effective policy implementation.

ASSESSING POLICY IMPLEMENTATION

Bhuyan *et al.* (2010:1) discuss three important reasons why assessing policy implementation is crucial. *Firstly*, it *promotes accountability* by holding policy-makers and implementers accountable for achieving stated goals and by reinvigorating commitment. *Secondly*, it e*nhances effectiveness* because understanding and addressing barriers to policy implementation can improve programme delivery. *Lastly*, it f*osters equity and quality* because effective policy implementation can establish minimum standards for quality, promote access, reduce inconsistencies among service providers and regions, and thus enhance quality.

CHARACTERISTICS OF POLICY IMPLEMENTATION

Policy implementation refers to the mechanisms, resources, and relationships that link policies to programme action. More specifically it means to carry out, accomplish, fulfil, produce or complete a given task. Therefore, understanding the nature of policy implementation is important because international experience indicates that policies, once adopted, are not always implemented as envisioned and do not necessarily achieve the intended results (Pressman & Wildavsky 1973:32; Calista 1994:120; Love 2004:72; Bhuyan *et al.* 2010:1). Moreover, some services are provided with scant attention to how such activities fit into or contribute to broader policy goals. Policy-makers and programme implementers also often have a limited understanding of how broader policies might help overcome service-delivery obstacles. Too often, policy and programme assessments emphasise outputs (for example, the number of people trained) or outcomes (for example, increased knowledge among trainees) but neglect the policy-implementation process which could shed light on the barriers to effective implementation. Assessing the policy implementation process "opens up

the 'black box' to provide greater understanding of why programmes work or do not work and the factors that contribute to programme success" (Love 2003:4).

Researchers have formulated numerous theories to demonstrate the essence of policy implementation and the factors that contribute to success or failure, including the different levels, processes, and stakeholders involved in implementing public policy (Thomas & Grindle 1990:1165; Calista 1994:131; Matland 1995:153; Alesch & Petak 2001:15; Brinkerhoff & Crosby 2002:43; Bressers 2004:291; and O'Toole 2004:315). However, providing an entire review of the literature is beyond the scope of this article. At the risk of oversimplifying, *implementation* can be considered as the process of carrying out and accomplishing a policy (Pressman & Wildavsky 1973:32). Implementation is often viewed as part of a linear process that proceeds directly from the predictions and prescriptions given by the official to the policy-maker(s), to implementation, and then to policy outcomes (Meier 1991:45). While this may sound straightforward, policy implementation can be complex. Newcomers to business and government often assume that a policy, once adopted, will be implemented in accordance with the policy-maker's intent. An increasingly body of research confirms what experienced officials and politicians know that this is simply not the case. Practitioners and scholars have come to understand that policy adoption is only one milestone in a continuing process of addressing the issue. It may be that successful implementation of the intent of the policy is the exception rather than the rule (Alesch & Petak 2001:19). More specifically, policy implementation is the set of activities and operations undertaken by various stakeholders towards the achievement of goals and objectives defined in an authorised policy (Nakamura & Smallwood 1980:109; Bhuyan *et al.* 2010:1).

Policy implementation is not necessarily a coherent, continuous process; instead, it is frequently fragmented and interrupted (Walt & Gilson 1994:361). Therefore, implementation problems are no longer primarily a management problem, confined to relations between a manager and a subordinate, or to processes within a single institution. Implementation of public policy stretched across spheres of government (in South Africa, from national and provincial to local) and across the agents of government from legislative to executive to administrative units (McLaughlin 1987:172). Implementation involves an on-going process of decision-making by key actors who work in complex policy and institutional contexts and face pressures from interested as well as opposing parties (Nakamura & Smallwood 1980:46; Grindle & Thomas 1991:68; Calista 1994:32). As such, the motivation, flow of information and balance of power and resources among stakeholders influence policy implementation processes (Bressers 2004:290). In addition, Bjorkman (1994:370) argues that implementation is a complex, interactive and ongoing process of decision-making, which is the most crucial part of the policy process since the policy outcome depends on how successful implementation has been. Brinkerhoff & Crosby (2005:44) agree with Bjorkman that the policy implementation process is at least as political as it is technical. It is complex, highly interactive and calls for consensus-building. Thus, it can be pointed out that implementation does not always happen automatically and, as a result, it can be either successful or unsuccessful, altered after a decision to pursue it has been made, and removed from the agenda because those responsible for implementing it are convinced that it cannot be carried through.

While policies codify a set of goals and actions, the manner in which a policy is implemented is not linear and may change over time for a variety of reasons, only some

of which are controlled by policymakers. Policies are often redefined and interpreted throughout the implementation process as they confront the realities of implementation on the ground (Alesch & Petak 2001:19). Leadership, stakeholder engagement, the context, resources, and operational issues-shape decisions and actions at various levels are key elements along the policy-to-action continuum. It may take a long time for some outcomes to materialise, hence, it is necessary to assess progress continuously to ascertain what is or is not being achieved and why. Consequently, a practical way to consider policy implementation is to consider the extent and form in which activities have been carried out and the nature of issues arising during implementation (Love 2003:5; Love 2004:73). There are several approaches to implementation: top-down, bottom-up and centrist which will be discussed in the following section.

APPROACHES TO IMPLEMENTATION

Different stakeholders may have divergent perspectives on what constitutes successful policy implementation (Matland 1995:150). The top-down approach is also known as the rational or systems model. A top-down approach emphasises the faithfulness with which implementation adheres to the policymakers' intentions (Sabatier 1986:28). This approach is characterised by its hierarchical and control themes. The aim is to improve performance, thus to achieve the institution's goals. The policy is an independent variable, a starting point and a benchmark which can and should be controlled by sanctions (Jordan 1995:6; Brynard 2007:37).

The bottom-up approach was a critique of the top-down approach. Conversely, a bottom-up approach argues for local implementers to adapt policy strategies to meet local needs and concerns (Palumbo, Maynard-Moody & Wright 1984:53; Elmore 1985:63; Maynard-Moody, Musheno & Palumbo 1990:837). Implementers of this approach, also known as street-level bureaucrats (Brodkin 2000:31), sought to achieve greater allegiance between policy-making and policy delivery. The policy is dependent upon the interaction among actors in the local sphere. The aim is to explain what actually happens when policies are implemented. These two perspectives can result in very different strategies and outcomes (Brynard 2007:38).

Increasingly, democratic policy systems support moving away from top-down or bottom-up dichotomies to a centrist approach emphasising how actors from different institutional contexts influence the policy to be implemented (Calista 1994:33). The evolution and bargaining models view policy implementation as a bargaining, exchange and negotiation action. The aim of this approach is to explain how policy is viewed as the product of bargaining and negotiation among interests. Policy is considered as dependent upon a process of bargaining. Implementation is seen as one part of an ongoing process of bargaining and compromising inputs from the top and innovations from the bottom (Jordan 1995:15). Definitions of what constitutes implementation can also vary depending on where actors are along the continuum of policy implementation, such as complying with policy directives, reaching intermediate performance indicators or benchmarks, or achieving long-term policy goals and objectives (Ingram & Schneider 1990:71). In the implementation process policy makers may use components from all or some of the above approaches, whichever suit their purposes for the policy at hand.

POLICY IMPLEMENTATION DIMENSIONS

Several theories exist on the key components of policy implementation and the ways in which to judge successful implementation. This article is based on organised themes, influential factors, and components of policy development and implementation to assist policymakers, programme managers, and other stakeholders to translate policies into action. The article locates the dimensions of policy implementation within the wider policy literature and describes why each component of the dimension is important for effective policy implementation. The framework outlines the following seven dimensions that influence policy implementation (Bhuyan *et al.* 2010:5):

- the policy, its formulation, and dissemination;
- social, political, and economic context;
- leadership for policy implementation;
- stakeholder involvement in policy implementation;
- implementation planning and resource mobilisation;
- operations and services; and
- feedback on progress and results;

Policy formulation and dissemination

The starting point for a policy implementation assessment is, naturally, the policy itself. The policy's content, formulation process, and extent of its dissemination influence whether the necessary content is in place to support effective implementation. Policy content should clearly frame the underlying problem area, the policy's goals and objectives, and the members of society to be benefited, along with the broad actions and strategies to address the problem (Nakamura & Smallwood 1980:45; Walt & Gilson 1994:361; Hardee, Feranil, Boezwinkle & Clark 2004:18). Other crucial elements include time horizons, rationale, and clarity of purpose. Unclear or confusing policy objectives or actions may be one reason why some policies are not implemented (Calista 1994:32).

The formulation process is important. Policy formulation is the part of the process during which proposed actions are articulated, debated, and drafted into language for a law or other policy statements. Policy formulation includes setting goals and outcomes of the policy or policies (Isaacs & Irvin 1991:42; Health Canada 2003:11). The goals and objectives may be general or specific, but should articulate the relevant activities and indicators by which they will be achieved and measured. The goals of a policy could include, for example, the creation of more employment opportunities, improved health status, or increased access to health services. Policy outcomes could include ensuring access to anti-retroviral treatment (ARV) for HIV in the workplace or access to emergency obstetric care for pregnant women. Goals and outcomes can be assessed through a number of lenses, including those of gender and equity considerations (Bhuyan *et al.* 2010:5).

A policy designed without meaningful stakeholder engagement may be more difficult to implement because it neither considers the needs of nor engenders buy-in and ownership from those who will implement or *benefit* from the policy (Klein & Knight 2005:245). Moreover, policies that result in new programmes, services, or operational guidelines need to be disseminated and understood by those people responsible for implementing and using

it (Brinkerhoff & Crosby 2002:43). If the members of society are going to access services or benefits from a new policy, they must also be made aware of any new provisions and programmes. Thus, for a policy to facilitate effective implementation, it should address the underlying problem through appropriate policy action; be based on strong stakeholder involvement; and be followed by dissemination to key audiences (Bhuyan *et al.* 2010:5).

Social, political and economic context

Policy formulation and implementation cannot be removed from the context in which it takes place. Countries have different political systems and forms of government, in addition to various social, cultural, and economic systems and levels of development. For example, a democratic and authoritarian government will apply different methods of policy-making and implementation. The social, political, and economic contexts influence the policies developed and how those policies are put into practice (Grindle & Thomas 1991:33; Hardee *et al.* 2004:18). Contextual and environmental factors can provide both opportunities and constraints for effective policy implementation (Calista 1994:119). Policy-making differs, depending on whether the political situation is stable and the government is functioning according to business as usual, or whether a crisis is precipitating rapid policy change (Thomas & Grindle 1994:55). Significantly, Kingdon (1984:109) defines politics as swings in national mood, vagaries of public opinion, election results, changes in administration, shifts in partisan or ideological distributions, and interest group pressure. The international political context is also important in the national policy process. These forces exist at multiple levels (for example, international, national and local) and change over time. For example, policies are often formulated within a multi-year timeframe. Thus, achieving policy goals means that implementation must proceed through inevitable changes in political regimes, governmental structures, economic conditions, and social environments. As the political economy changes, some policy contexts also change, in turn affecting which actors are involved, which policy decisions are made, and what processes take place at various levels, including the operational and service delivery levels (Walt & Gilson 1994:362; Bhuyan *et al.* 2010:5). Social settings and cultural practices can vary, not only among countries but also within countries, affecting all components of the policy process.

Leadership for policy implementation

Leadership is essential for effective policy implementation (Bryson & Crosby 2005:36). High-level actors and influential leaders can communicate about the policy's rationale and mechanisms, and champion the policy to ensure implementation, which requires co-ordination and co-operation (Bhuyan 2005:27). The level of consensus among leaders and other policy stakeholders on the content of a policy and its need for implementation will affect the degree and timing of its implementation (Thomas & Grindle 1990:1164). However, the individuals or groups that led policy formulation might not follow up its implementation, or different groups might be responsible for carrying out policy directives (Nakamura & Smallwood 1980:58). For example, formulating national policies is in the domain of national government officials, but implementation will likely be the responsibility of municipal officials and structures, particularly in the context of decentralisation (Stover & Johnston 1999:17).

Stakeholder involvement in policy implementation

Successful policy processes require democratic public participation; where policy makers and the public continually engage in dialogue, examine the consequences for fundamental values, as well as sharing burdens and benefits. In the national sphere, different stakeholders should be involved in order to reduce political pressures on the government. Policy stakeholders include groups or individuals responsible for implementation, people who may be positively or negatively affected by the policy's implementation (or lack of implementation), and officials and professionals accountable for achieving policy goals. This approach should facilitate the creation of sensitive governance infrastructure between governments and other stakeholders to create an active civil society (Policy Project 1999:25; Kuye 2004:463; Umar & Kuye 2006:815). Stakeholder participation in policy implementation is influenced by a range of factors, including the context, the policy content and stakeholders' needs and resources, level of knowledge of the policy, and their relative power and influence (Altman & Petkus 1994; Walt & Gilson 1994; Thomas 1995; and Bressers 2004). The involvement of stakeholders in implementation can be challenging because it often requires joint actions in response to new partnerships that did not exist previously (Calista 1994:119). In some cases, stakeholder groups and organisations that may be unrelated, or are not always committed to the same outcomes, must reach agreement to support implementation. Stakeholders may also enter the fray in ways not planned by the policy. As policy implementation unfolds, additional stakeholders may find themselves being affected by the changes and may also seeks to insert themselves into the process (Bhuyan *et al.* 2010:5).The successful engagement of different groups within society, civil society and the private sector is crucial to implementation, because each sector contributes unique perspectives, skills and resources (Altman & Petkus 1994:24; Bryson 1988:67). For example, civil society groups are well-suited to assist in adapting policy strategies to reach underserved communities, such as the poor, marginalised groups, and rural populations. They can also play a role in monitoring implementation and advocating specific strategies to improve implementation, serving as watchdogs to ensure that funding is allocated and appropriate activities are carried out. The private sector's involvement can catalyse improved quality of care and efficient logistics systems, as well as complement public sector services (Bhuyan *et al.* 2010:8).

Planning for implementation and resource mobilisation

Effective implementation requires planning and the mobilisation of sufficient resources. The difficult decisions that may have been avoided when policies were drafted must be resolved as plans and guidelines are developed (Stover & Johnston 1999:23). Strong strategic action plans, work plans, budgets, and operational directives are often the missing links between policy formulation and actual implementation. International experiences illustrate that guidance for implementation can range from a precise blueprint to rather vague exhortations (Nakamura & Smallwood 1980:31). Implementation is a challenging process, even when written guidelines on goals, strategies, roles and responsibilities, and a monitoring framework are provided. It is even more challenging in the absence of written guidance and clear action plans.

In the implementation process, political, financial, managerial and technical resources are needed. Therefore, throughout the implementation process it is important to guard

against those opposing the policy change and blocking access to these required resources. The process confirms the fact that sometimes the policy outcome is very different from what the planners conceived due to the process of change and conflict occurring in the implementation stage (Brynard 2007:38).

Once strategies are determined, implementation organisations need to estimate and mobilise the financial, human, and material resources required to implement the policy effectively. Because new policies often involve new strategies, organisations may be required to modify or even abandon old practices and undertake new activities. In many cases, this requires implementers to be trained in the content of the policies and required skills. For example, if a policy calls for expanding the pool of healthcare providers who can perform family planning services, such as the insertion of intra-uterine devices, then nurses or other personnel will need appropriate training if the policy is to achieve its goal. The degree of change that organisations face and their readiness for change can vary greatly. Adapting to such change may be challenging for some implementing organisations, and implementation planning may not take this into account (Brinkerhoff & Crosby 2002:43; Klein & Knight 2005:245). Longstanding norms and socio-cultural factors may affect the capacity of governments and organisations to act; thus, it is crucial to address these factors when planning for policy implementation (Humanist Committee on Human Rights 2006:11; Bhuyan *et al.* 2010:8).

Operations and services

The process of implementing a new policy - particularly those policies that require significant training, learning, and changes within or among organisations, can be time-consuming and expensive. Delays and costs can affect operations and services (Calista 1994:120; Klein & Knight 2005:246). Policy implementation at the operational and service levels also involves co-ordination with other organisations – including those that may have no previous experience working together, which may have either positive or a negative effect on service delivery (Calista 1994:120; Brinkerhoff & Crosby 2002:44).

In addition, a *one-size fits all* approach to implementation will most likely not meet the varied needs of different target populations and clients of services in the country. Thus, the degree of flexibility to adapt policy strategies affects the ability of service providers and other stakeholders to respond to local needs or specific subgroups of the population covered by the policy (Altman & Petkus 1994:42). Implementation, therefore, involves adapting the ideal plan to local conditions, organisational dynamics, and programmatic uncertainties. This process is often uneven and, in the end, actual programmes and services often turn out to be different from the original plans (W.K. Kellogg Foundation 2004:24; Bhuyan *et al.* 2010:9). Unforeseen operational barriers arising from implementing a policy may also pose challenges that have to be overcome before the policy can produce the intended improvements in access and quality to service delivery (Cross, Hardee & Jewell 2001:17).

Feedback on progress and results

Policies typically include monitoring and reporting requirements, which vary in terms of clarity and quality. Some policies also designate an entity to be responsible for monitoring

Table 1 Dimensions of policy implementation

	Dimensions of Policy Implementation
The policy, its formulation, and dissemination	Refers to the policy content, the nature of the formulation process, and the degree of dissemination. Are the policy's goals, objectives, and strategies clear and appropriate given the issues to be addressed by the policy? Do key stakeholders agree on the goals and strategies? Has the policy been disseminated to and understood by those responsible for implementation?
Social, Political, and Economic Context	Refers to the various social, political, and economic factors outside of the policy process that can either enhance or hinder effective implementation. Depending on the nature and scope of the policy, social norms such as gender inequality and governing processes such as decentralisation and other factors can affect policy implementation. What are the effects and consequences of these factors?
Leadership for policy implementation	Recognizes that strong leadership and commitment are essential to ensure the follow through, resources, and accountability needed for putting policies into practice. However, the leaders responsible for policy formulation might find their attention diverted elsewhere once the policy is adopted or the responsibility for leading implementation might shift to new individuals and groups. How effective is the leadership for implementation?
Stakeholder involvement in policy implementation	Recognizes that policy formulation is increasingly a multisectoral endeavor, yet this engagement might not continue during the policy implementation stage. Thus, it is crucial to consider the extent of stakeholder involvement in policy implementation and the nature of the relationships and collaboration among different stakeholders.
Planning for implementation and resource mobilization	Consider the planning, resources, and capacity needed to facilitate policy implementation. Does an implementation plan exist? Do organizations need new skills and training in order to implement the new policy? How will funding for new initiatives be ensured? How reliable is the resource flow?
Operations and services	Refers to the co-ordination mechanisms, operational systems, and capacity of individuals and organizations charged with delivering services outlined in the policy. What are the positive changes as a result of putting the policy into practice on the ground? What are the challenges?
Feedback on progress and results	Recognizes the importance of regularly gathering, disseminating and using feedback to assess progress toward achieving results. Who is and is not receiving information about implementation? How is the information used? Are the perspectives of beneficiaries or clients considered?

Source: Bhuyan, Jorgensen & Sharma 2010:6

– often a government agency or an official body comprising government and/or non-governmental representatives. Other groups from civil society, the private sector, media or public sector may also be involved, either officially or due to their own initiative, in monitoring the policy implementation process. Monitoring and evaluation should ensure accountability, improved performance and encouragement to do more. It is important that the different stakeholders involved in the process should be streamlined and a successful communication effort should be launched. In addition, an agreed–upon set of indicators and feedback system to track progress towards the achievement of results facilitates a comprehensive and measurable process. It is also important to consider the perspectives of beneficiaries or clients of services covered by the policy. By receiving feedback and using information on how policy implementation progresses, policymakers and implementers will be in a better position to assess interim achievements, make necessary course corrections,

and consider themselves as part of a larger effort (W.K. Kellogg 2004:33; USAID 2001:13; Bhuyan *et al.* 2010; Kuye 2010:279, Brynard 2011:157). Table 1 below provides a summary of the seven dimensions of policy implementation.

CONCLUSION

Policy implementation can be studied from different perspectives using different theoretical tools. Not one perspective can be singled out as better than the rest, as each attempt endeavours to explain policy and programme implementation and the factors influencing it. Therefore, a supportive policy environment can be taken as one of the foundations on which to improve effective policy implementation. Policies assist in determining guidelines, systems and relationships that govern service delivery. Yet, even the best policies can encounter implementation challenges.

Moreover, operational barriers to programmes can often be alleviated through appropriate policy solutions and reforms. Attention to policy issues should not end with the creation of the policy, which is, in fact, only the beginning of the policy to action *continuum.* Thus, policies are *living documents.* They require various inputs to assist to fulfil the goals. The policy dimensions mentioned in this article explain the importance of levelling the playing field for effective policy implementation. More attention should be given to clear guidelines and implementation plans, strong leadership, multisectoral stakeholder involvement, adequate and accessible resources, and effective feedback and monitoring systems which will enhance policy implementation.

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