THE POLICY GAP IN SOUTH AFRICA

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ABSTRACT

The mere existence of good policies does not automatically result in successful implementation. Problems with policies often lie in the implementation thereof, thus forming a policy gap. The policy gap pertains not only to practice but also to research in the field of policy implementation. The policy gap can vary, as do the variables involved with failed policy implementation. Policy implementation can therefore be regarded as the missing link of policy. This article draws attention to the policy gap in South Africa and highlights some critical aspects of policy implementation. Policy implementation is merely the expected outcomes versus the results actually achieved. Stumbling blocks in the implementation of policy are not unique to South Africa.

INTRODUCTION

Policy implementation in the not so distant past was a foreign field for most scholars in Public Administration in South Africa. Looking back after 13 years of democracy, one realises that the challenges of service delivery could easily indicate flawed policy implementation. One source of failure that has emerged is that both political and bureaucratic players excluded calculations about possible failure of programmes from formal policy considerations. In retrospect, the impugned shortcomings regarding policy implementation were, in fact, not so much the fault of the brain trust that created them, but the result of deficiencies within the bureaucracy, i.e. them, not us.

It is important to note the seminal work on policy implementation which started in 1973 with the work of Jeffrey Pressman and Aaron Wildavsky. One can readily surrender parsimony about the importance of policy implementation by scanning the prolific literature on the topic. To single out certain proponents in policy implementation would be rather unfair, but Paul Sabatier, Laurence O'Toole, and Malcolm Goggin have contributed substantially to expounding the complexity of the reality.

Scholars in policy implementation can no longer claim that implementation has reached an intellectual dead end. In South Africa, however, more needs to be done to

investigate and produce seminal work about the implementation cases at hand. This article attempts to indicate where some of the policy implementation gaps might lie, the possible problems experienced, and new ways to invigorate implementation.

DEFINING THE POLICY GAP

The policy gap is what transpires in the implementation process between policy expectations and perceived policy results. The policy gap can also be defined in a much broader way, as in the following definition of Mazmanian and Sabatier (1983:20-21):

> Implementation is the carrying out of a basic policy decision, usually incorporated in a statute but which can also take the form of important executive orders of court decisions. Ideally, that decision identifies the problem(s) to be addressed, stipulates the objective(s) to be pursued, and, in a variety of ways, 'structures' the implementation process. The process normally runs through a number of stages beginning with passage of the basic statute, followed by the policy outputs (decisions) of the implementation agencies, the compliance of target groups with those decisions, the actual impacts of agency decisions, and, finally, important revisions (or attempted revisions) in the basic structure.

In the definition of Mazmanian and Sabatier (1983) it becomes evident that the policy gap can entail a number of aspects. These vary loosely between compliance issues and the desired results of the implementation. First generation researchers in the so-called *top-down approach* to policy implementation usually voice such concerns. In many ways, this is where the South African policy gap currently remains. The focus is invariably on issues dealing with the implementation or institutions at hand, and is rarely concerned with generalisations. A second generation of research into policy implementation in South Africa is therefore needed that moves towards theory generation in surrounding policy environments.

The contemporary policy gap is more than daunting – it is apparently impenetrable. Implementation is no longer solely about achieving what the policy maker once wanted but, instead, it is about what scientific have since learned to prefer; of course, policy makers tend to change their minds from time to time. After scrutinising the implementation literature, one discovers that faulty implementation is commonplace.

POLICY IMPLEMENTATION RESEARCH

As indicated in the previous section, research on South African policy implementation needs to move towards new perspectives and theories that relate to the current environment. The approach can either be inductive (top-down policy implementation) or deductive (bottom-up policy implementation). While the first approach is based more on predictions, the second approach encourages a more generalised, explanatory role (deLeon 1999:322). Both these approaches to research

in policy implementation can contribute valuable information about the current policy implementation scene in South Africa.

Policy implementation research should focus on both the outcome of policy implementation and the process. The values and world view of policy makers and policy implementers might not be the same. In some instances, the top-down mode in policy implementation research is regarded as more democratic than the bottom-up analytical mode (deLeon 1999:324). The top-down approach (democratic) to policy implementation research seems to be more popular, based on the argument that appointed officials are not particularly responsible to their constituents (Matland 1995). This does not mean that clients are helpless in their relationship with officials. Officials might indeed be removed from their clients by civil service, unions, and tenure roles. It is interesting to note that officials must obtain client compliance with their decisions, particularly when they are evaluated in terms of their clients' behaviour or performance (Lipsky 1980:57). Take note in this regard of the recent demonstrations by clients in the sphere of local government in South Africa, with their apparent dissatisfaction with service delivery. It is therefore of utmost importance that officials retain the trust of their clients.

PROBLEMS WITH POLICY IMPLEMENTATION

Since the advent of democracy in South Africa a whole host of new policies has proliferated, to address the inequalities of the past. During the period 1995 to 1997 a number of policy *White Papers* appeared (the White Paper era). The challenges in service delivery eventually brought about the well known *White Paper on Transforming Public Service Delivery*, in 1997. Despite the said White Paper and even guidelines for the implementation of this policy (Batho Pele Handbook 2003), the challenges of service delivery remain. It is important to note that policy implementation, besides the particular circumstances, is subject to conventional reasons for the failure of policies. Since policy also aims to bring about behavioural change at the individual level, it is necessary for the cognitive dimension to also be understood and considered in order to improve policy implementation (Sajid 2006:3). The stages of policy implementation were still underway by mid-2001, but they afforded fewer opportunities for participation and therefore created another policy gap (Booysen 2001:128). The early 2000s clearly departed from the 1990s' policy-making conditions towards new policy-making initiatives and a resolve to succeed in policy implementation. Yet, the policy gap was far from over (Booysen 2001:129).

The complexities of policy development could be one reason for the failure of implementation. However, in developing countries the failure of policy can largely be attributed to issues of poor implementation (Sajid 2006:5). Wildavsky (1975) aptly states that since policy is made, based on the present knowledge of an uncertain future, it is bound to fall short in some or many aspects depending on the accuracy of existing knowledge and estimated predictions.

Sometimes policies set out to achieve ambitious targets which ultimately fall short of their desired outcomes. The lack of reliable data often hampers policy makers' ability to devise clear policy goals with well defined implementation plans and evaluation

mechanisms. Another problem of policy implementation could be political commitment. Leadership and political commitment are critical for the success of policy. The failure of reform programmes in Swaziland could be attributed mainly to the lack of political commitment (McCourt 2003).

The issues of ineffective government and corruption have also been described as major obstacles to proper policy implementation. The lack of co-ordination among political representatives and officials, and among government departments, could also be a problem with implementation. Developing countries are criticised for their high level of corruption (Sajid 2006:7).

Another recurring criticism of policy implementation is the orientation towards centralisation. This means that policies and plans are developed in the national sphere with little consultation with the final implementers. For this reason, policy often fails to capture the subtleties of initiatives at grassroots level, and therefore appears to be alien to the managers and the very implementers of the policy. The distance of policy makers from practice not only causes problems for the managers of the policy, but also creates a lack of harmony among the different elements of the same policy, and among the different units of machinery of government (Sajid 2006:7).

Financial and technical resources, along with the quality of human resources, are key factors that contribute to successful policy implementation. (See the Human Resources Development Strategy for the Public Service, 2003-2006). Besides the lack of resources, there might also be a problem with the management of resources. The over- or under spending of the budget might be a good indicator of such mismanagement.

INVOLVEMENT IN PLANNING AND DELIVERY OF SERVICES

The rights of service users and society to be involved in the planning and delivery of services are promoted by international organisations like the World Health Organisation (Evans 2003:331). This is a rather new concept and therefore not much exists in the literature about the measurement of such involvement. The policy gap exists partly due to the lack of the involvement of clients in the process. The *Constitution of the Republic of South Africa*, 1996 makes various provisions for constitutional and political rights that enhance citizen participation (Arko-Cobbah 2002:54). A requirement for such involvement is the provision of accurate, reliable and understandable information to the end users of the policy. This again, could indicate a gap in the implementation of the policy.

In South Africa one should consider the policy gap between policy rhetoric and practice in relation to attempts to entrench democracy and participation. The new democratic state that emerged in South Africa after 1994 was greeted with multiple and somehow contradictory demands. It was expected to deliver a more just and humane society in a climate of rising expectations and hopeful promises. Further, it was presumed that the state would unify a divided society without threatening any part of the population. The state was expected to be responsive to the will of the people, to guarantee increased participation and to extend democracy in society. The state was expected to establish a sound and vibrant relationship with organisations in civil society. South Africa in

the 1990s was predominantly in the stage of policy formulation (Booysen 2001:129). However, there are a number of cases which highlight the ongoing gap between policy intention and policy practice. One case in point is the devolved school governance model in which a number of conflicts have emerged, including issues relating to setting school fees, racial politics and the appointment of teachers (Sayed 2002:43).

On the one hand, there is commitment to greater participation in democratising school governance, but on the other hand, the democratic state is representative of the majority electorate and has to balance the needs of specific groups with the overall good of society. This brings into play the gap between individual rights (as expressed, for example, in School Governing Bodies) and the role of the state in creating a uniform education system (Sayed 2002:44). Thus the analysis of the education policy alone sharply reveals the disjuncture between policy intention and policy practice, namely the policy gap.

CITIZEN INVOLVEMENT IN SOUTH AFRICA

According to the IDASA Research Report (1999:74), citizen involvement could be achieved according to any of the following models, as discussed below:

- committee model;
- specialist public participation model;
- outsource model; and
- public relations/communications model.

In particular instances policy provides for committees to include activities like public hearings, calling for and receiving submissions, conducting parliamentary tours, and engaging in education campaigns. The gap is often caused by poor communication between the committee and the appointed officials responsible for the particular function. The specialist public participation model is prominent in the Gauteng Provincial Legislature (Arko-Cobbah 2002:63) and is charged with handling public hearings, the media and public relations functions. In the instance of the outsourcing model, an external agency is given the responsibility of facilitating the participation process. The gap in this instance is the daily control and accountability of the outsourced agency. The KwaZulu-Natal Provincial Legislature provides an example of this model (Arko-Cobbah 2002:64). In the Public relations and communications model, citizen involvement is delegated to the public relations offices. The gap lies in the fact that the public relations offices are removed from the legislature and therefore from the centre of policy-making. This practice can be found in the provincial legislatures of the Free State, Mpumalanga and the North West (Arko-Cobbah 2002:64).

TRANSLATING POLICY INTO PRACTICE

The smooth transition from policy to practice will always remain a challenge. The concern is the extent of the gap between policy and practice. Formulating a policy without a thorough understanding of the implications of the environment's influence

on the policy can be compared to building an airplane without an understanding of basic physics; though it may appear to have all the appropriate parts in the appropriate places, without the underlying engineering required for flight, it will never get off the ground (Portier 2007). The worse case is actually when it indeed manages to take off, but is unable to sustain itself in flight, sometimes with devastating consequences. Although this example of a plane is rather simple to comprehend, the problems of modern society become more complex over time. To fill this policy gap, improved research translation should be a priority. Training for the translation of technical programmes into practical sustainability is another necessity to be considered.

The translation of policy into practice is aptly illustrated by the language policy in South Africa. South African language policy has become much more democratic since 1994. The new language policy recognises nine indigenous African languages in addition to English and Afrikaans: IsiZulu, IsiXhosa, IsiNdebele and Siswati from the Nguni language group and Sepedi, Sesotho and Setswana representing the Sotho group. Tshivenda and Xitsonga are also official languages. Education policies allow these indigenous languages as the medium of instruction in schools (Mpe 1999); however language and educational policies acknowledge the almost impossible task of translating policy into practice. Against the backdrop of the complex demographics that make up the nine provinces of South Africa, how does one ensure that all languages are represented fairly within each region? One way of solving the problem is to let each region identify which languages should be official for that particular region. This possibility seems to be a good theory, but practice dictates different realities. According to Mpe (1999), surveys have shown that many parents still prefer their children to be instructed in English, as they see this as a language that gives access to economic and other privileges.

It is important to realise that policy-making is not isolated from the environment. The demands for policy action are the result of problems and conflicts emanating from the environment and transmitted to the political system by groups and officials. Besides this local process, other nations may also become part of the environment when, for instance, policies regarding foreign affairs or defence are involved. The Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP) of the African National Congress (ANC) is an example of problems and conflicts experienced at grass-roots level which ultimately became government policy implemented by the South African Government (Smith 2003: 317).

THE GAP BETWEEN DEMANDS AND OUTCOMES

There seem to be quite a number of gaps between policy goals and outcomes. States are often misguided in their belief that policy can influence the inevitable flow of an issue (Lahav 2006:203). Various studies have provided evidence that a range of actors influence policy outcomes. They include, for instance, organised interest groups, courts, ethnic groups, trade unions, government institutions, civil society and organised business. Furthermore, a number of dimensions are apparent in the policy gap. These include the disjuncture between members of the public and policy makers at the decision-making and implementation stages; the relationship between policy goals and outputs;

and the dynamics between the international and domestic arenas (Lahav 2006:218). In a representative democracy, gaps in policy preferences between citizens and leaders are potentially troublesome (Page 2000:339). This is particularly true if the leaders influence policy making and if policy itself diverges from what ordinary citizens say they want.

BEST PRACTICES

Past research on policy implementation gaps could provide valuable information for the effective implementation of policies. The obstacles to effective policy implementation are varied, but some of the rather important obstacles can be regarded as the following: resistance – some officials (implementers) resist implementation because they feel it is not in their interest; imperfect convergence of interest – some officials create delays or threaten to delay in order to expand their benefits; disorganised interests – some officials create obstacles simply because they are unclear where the interest lies (Levin 1986:313).

In general, the following aspects could serve as broad criteria for effective implementation. *Firstly*, the programme is able to restrict delays to a reasonable level. *Secondly*, a programme should be able to hold financial costs to a reasonable level. *Thirdly*, it should be able to meet its original objectives without significant alteration or underachievement of these objectives (Levin 1986:313). The roles of the different implementers are also important for effective implementation. There is normally someone who can be regarded as a *fixer* if obstacles are experienced. As *fixers*, they are constantly repairing and adjusting the machinery used for the execution of a programme. The creation of incentives is sometimes also extremely important to obtain the buy-in or interest of the parties involved. In some cases, groups or clients that would benefit from a programme are not aware of those prospective benefits. Although effective implementation depends on good administration, that is not sufficient in itself (Levin 1986:317)

CONCLUSION

In the 1990s South Africa was predominantly at the stage of policy formulation. The second term of the democratic government has largely shifted the focus to policy implementation. With the dawning of the implementation phase of policy, more policy gaps have manifested themselves. The need for stakeholder and public involvement in the design and formulation of policies is but one of many possible gaps. These gaps vary and although no single gap could be identified, specific policy gaps can be highlighted in some policy domains such as education and language. This article argues that to understand policy making gaps in South Africa, the analysis has to focus on the domain, context and interactive complexities of policies and policy actors.

The South African Government is facing the dual challenge of consultative and democratised processes, vying with the need to implement policies speedily and successfully. The latter has emerged as the dominant force in the current situation. This article argues that not only should the South African practice of policy implementation

receive attention, but so too should mainstream research in policy implementation. Given that government and public officials still need to understand the implementation process, these two arguments are vital for the successful delivery of policy goods and services in South Africa. Policy implementers need a better understanding as to what hurdles are threatening and how they may be overcome in a reactive implementation mode. It is imperative to learn not only from policy failures, but instead to focus on lessons learnt from policy successes.

In essence, implementation is nothing more than the comparison between expected policy outcomes versus the results actually achieved. In some instances, clients need to lower their expectations of public programmes by not demanding complete fulfillment thereof. It is really a case of focusing on what implementation can deliver in practice, as opposed to clinging to unfulfilled promises.

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