

A Critical Note on Policy Implementation and Implementation Failure

Anisur Rahman Khan

Assistant Professor,
 East West University, Dhaka-1212, Bangladesh
Email: khanpatc@gmail.com

Policy implementation involves translating the goals and objectives of a policy into an action. The systematic study of policy implementation is relatively new in the broader domain of social science. This paper, through a content analysis, critically examines the theoretical issues associated with policy implementation, and the factors associated with implementation failure. Some practical strategies are suggested to overcome implementation performance and concludes with the proposition that implementation failure is also due to lack of theoretical sophistication.

[Key Words: Public policy, policy implementation, policy performance, implementation theory]

Introduction

Public policy is the guide to action and it connotes a broader framework to operationalize a philosophy, principle, vision or decision, mandate etc. which are translated into various programs, projects and actions. A policy entails the broad statement of future goals and actions, and expresses the ways and means of attaining them. It is a framework of governmental intervention covers a variety of activities. Anderson (2010) defines public policy as a purposive course of action followed by an actor or set of actors in dealing with a problem or matter of concern. Stewart, Hedge, & Lester (2008), on the other hand, define public policy as a series or pattern of government activities or decisions that are designed to remedy some social problems. What is called public policy must have to be implemented. The success of an adopted public policy depends on how successfully it is implemented. Even the very best policy is of little worth if it is not implemented successfully or properly. One of the problems of successful policy implementation is that it lacks in proper direction or guidelines on how to implement it. Markedly, such direction is supposed to be derived from the theories which it is supposed to follow. Unfortunately, there is a consensus amongst the scholars that the discipline “policy implementation” suffers from viable, valid, and universally accepted grand or good theories. In the discipline policy implementation, perhaps, there is no such grand or full-fledged theory, for instance, as comparable to Durkheim’s sociological theory of anomie or other similar pattern of theoretical sophistication (Hill & Hupe,

2014). One of the reasons why there is no such grand theory in implementation because as a discipline it is still in its infancy (Goggin, Bowman, Lester, & O'Toole, 1990), and over the years, implementation has also been seriously overlooked in the broader domain of public administration which restricted the theoretical development of this discipline. Moreover, the implementation of a particular policy is very much context specific as it depends upon political, social, economic, organisational and attitudinal factors that influence how well or how poorly a policy or program has been implemented (Meter & Horn, 1975; Stewart et al., 2008), and it also varies considerably over time, across polices, and from one state to the next (Goggin et al., 1990). For instance; the implementation of any policy in a democratic country is often scrutinised by various stakeholders whereas it is very easy for an autocratic country to implement any policy as there are less opportunities for the stakeholders to be involved in the process. The contextual factors have also restricted the discipline for being adequately developed in terms of theoretical advancement. This paper sheds lights on the theoretical issues surrounding policy implementation and develops a linkage with implementation failure in order to expand our understanding about this discipline.

Theory and the State of the Discipline-“Policy Implementation”

In order to be considered as a good theory, the theory must follow the virtues such as uniqueness, parsimony, conservation, generalizability, fecundity, internal consistency, empirical riskiness, and abstraction which are applicable to all research methods (Wacker, 1998). It is suggested that a good theory in public policy should exhibit some characteristics such as validity, economy, testability, organisation/understanding, heuristic, causal explanation, predictive, relevance/usefulness, powerful, reliability, objectivity and honesty. Getting any single theory to reflect all of these traits would present serious challenges in any disciple, and it is highly unlikely that policy theory would contain all these characteristics (McCool, 1995). Ironically, this is a case with policy implementation. In this connection, Goggin et al. (1990) comment the lack of grand theory obfuscates what implementation is and is not. Nonetheless, although the discipline policy implementation lacks in having grand or classic theories, over a span of time, different theoretical models or approaches (at least two: top-down and bottom-up) (Stewart et al., 2008), and case studies have been developed in the discipline of policy implementation. Based on the contextual premises mentioned above, in the following, some explanations have been given about the state of the discipline and the ways it has embraced various models and approaches in explaining and understanding how policy implementation proceeds on.

The term “policy implementation” has been defined by many scholars from various perspectives. Implementation is an important stage of the policy-making process. It means the execution of the law in which various stakeholders, organisations, procedures, and techniques work together to put polices into effect with a view to attaining policy goals (Stewart et al., 2008).

Implementation can be viewed as a process, an output and an outcome, and it involves a number of actors, organisations and techniques of control. It is the process of the interactions between setting goals and the actions directed towards achieving them (Pressman & Wildavsky, 1973). Simon (2010) views implementation as the application of the policy by government administrative machinery in order to achieve the goals. Specifically, policy implementation encompasses those actions by public and private individuals that are directed at the achievement of objectives set forth in prior policy decisions (Meter & Horn, 1975). The constituent element of most cited definitions of implementation is the gap that exists between policy intent and outcomes (Maznamin & Sabatier, 1989; Smith & Larimer, 2009). Implementation studies, therefore, place emphasis on understanding the success or failure of public policy by elaborating on factors that affect it. This concept of implementation helps to draw the attention of policy makers and implementers to study the processes that influence and establish the outcome of public policy (Bempah, 2012).

The first generation study of policy implementation has grown substantially since the seminal book “Implementation: How Great Expectations in Washington are Dashed in Oakland” of Pressman and Wildavsky was published in 1973. Until the publication of the book there was a period of academic debate about the meaning of implementation (Hill & Hume, 2014). As a case study, it explored the difficulties encountered by the Economic Development Administration in Oakland, California when trying to implement a job creation program during the 1960s. The research resulted in demonstrable progress in at least two respects. Firstly, there is now an enhanced understanding of the meaning of implementation and how it varies across time, polices and government; and secondly, it links policy design and implementation performance (Stewart et al., 2008). Another important first generation study was conducted by E. Bardach’s (1977) the “Implementation Game” (Pulzl & Treib, 2007). The first generation studies were primarily concerned towards describing numerous barriers to effective policy implementation (Stewart et al., 2008). However, first generation studies have been criticised for being theoretical, case-specific and noncumulative (Goggin et al. 1990) and the theory building was not at the heart of first generation research (Pulzl & Treib, 2007).

The second generation implementation scholars, on the other hand, worked for the development of analytical frameworks to guide research on the complex phenomenon of policy implementation. The second generation studies were more concerned with explaining implementation success or failure (Stewart et al., 2008), and made contributions towards developing analytical frameworks/models to guide research on implementation (Goggin et al., 1990). Second generation studies are broadly classified into top-down and bottom-up approaches of policy implementation (Stewart et al., 2008). This period was seemingly marked by the debate that was later dubbed as the top-down and bottom-up approaches/models of implementation research (Pulzl & Treib,

2007). Notable scholars like Meter and Horn, Maznamin and Sabatier illustrated top-down model in explaining implementation, while bottom-up scholars like Elmore, Lipsky emphasised that implementation consists of the everyday problem solving strategies of 'street-level bureaucrats' (Pulzl & Treib, 2007). Meter and Horn's (1975) top-down model depicts six variables to shape the linkage between policy and performance which include: 1. policy standards and objectives; 2. resources; 3. intergovernmental communication and enforcement activities; 4. characteristics of implementing agencies; economic, social and political conditions and 6. Disposition of the implementers. Maznamin and Sabatier's (1989) top-down model involved 16 independent variables in the implementation process under three broader categories which include: 1. the tractability of the problem; 2. ability of the statute to structure implementation and 3. No statutory variables affecting implementation. Conversely, the bottom-up approach emphasises the role of administrators at the local level who are directly involved in implementation in accordance with their responsibility to accomplish the policy's aims and objectives (Birkland, 2005). The bottom-up approach suggests that implementation is best studied by starting at the lowest levels of implementation system or chain and moving upward to see where implementation is more successful or less so (Bachrach & Baratz quoted in Raadschelders, 2003). The bottom-up advocates make a focus on policy implementers at the local level, and it is activity of the bureaucrats. In this connection Lipsky, (1980) came up with the term 'street level bureaucrats', and state that they are the front-line public officials implementing government policies. Lipsky's concept views street level bureaucrats as the real policymakers and enhance the understanding of how discretionary powers and decisions made by policy implementers affects it successful outcomes. In similar opinion, Weimer & Vining (2011) emphasise that street-level bureaucrats or front-line implementers actually implement almost all policies. Unlike top-down approach, the bottom-up approach starts by identifying the network of actors involved in service delivery in local area and asks them about their goals, strategies, activities and contact (Stewart et. al., 2008).

Again, scholars tend to unify the two approaches or provide a hybrid one, and argue that policymakers should employ policy instruments based on the structure of target groups (Sabatier, 1988; Goggin et al., 1990). According to the hybrid approach, the implementation outcome is influenced by the central and local level factors (Goggin et al., 1990). Both the top-down and the bottom-up approaches are criticised for their limited explanatory ability of the dynamics of implementation from their respective analytical frameworks (Stewart et al., 2008), and no one has been able to validate the propositions derived from the earlier perspectives including the hybrid or synthesised one (Goggin et al., 1990). Notably, such third generation research attempted to bridge the gap between top-down and bottom-up approaches by incorporating insights of both camps into their theoretical models (Pulzl & Treib, 2007). The goal of third generation research was simply to be more scientific than the previous two in its

approach to the study of implementation. Third generation research attempted to confront directly the conceptual and measurement problems that have impeded progress in the discipline (Goggin et al., 1990), and put emphasis on specifying clear hypotheses, finding proper operationalization's, and producing empirical observations to test the hypotheses (Pulzl & Treib, 2007). In the circumstances, it is clearly evident that the discipline implementation lacks in producing grand theory rather it has been flourished to its present level based on few theoretical models, frameworks or approaches. Therefore, many scholars of policy implementation now agree that the future phase of research in implementation must be directed towards theory development (Stewart et al., 2008). Thus, the discipline policy implementation appears to have been lacking in producing theory or grand theory although there are some theoretical models and approaches in literature of policy implementation. Lack of theoretical sophistication is a critical problem with policy implementation, and this desperately affects policy performance since the performance of a policy depends on the guidance available to the implementers, and proper guidance is assumed to be derived from good theories. Despite having this problem, some scholars have focused on implementation failure in their own ways which can be summarised as follows.

Failure of Policy Implementation

The performance of policy implementation can be categorised into three dimensions such as; (1) output, outcome, and ultimate outcome of policy; (2) impact of policy; and (3) measurement whether the policy leads to the development of country/society as a whole. Brinkerhoff and Hoff (2002) state that successful policy outcomes depend not only upon designing good policies but upon managing their implementation. Until the early 1970s, implementation was considered unproblematic, and was regarded as simply putting the policy into practice. This viewpoint changed with the publication of Pressman and Wildavsky's "Implementation" in 1973. They studied the implementation strategies of the Economic Development Administration (EDA) in Oakland, California, USA. EDA was commissioned to create employment opportunities for the Black people through various measures such as; business loans, training and public works. Despite having a very good intention, the program could not be successfully implemented. The major factors for failure of EDA's programme include: 1. Faulty Program Theory: if a policy needs to be successful, it needs sound theoretical validity. But it was not the case with EDA. The economic theory of EDA was faulty because it aimed at the wrong target and such defect also exacerbated bureaucratic problems. 2. Unclear Goals and Objectives: Clarity of goals, targets and objectives encourages and fosters prompt implementation. EDA had difficulties in clarifying goals and targets because of its theoretical defects. For example; Pressman & Wildavsky (1973) observed that EDA wrongly subsidised the capital of business enterprises rather than paying the employees a subsidy on wages. They also asserted, "When objectives are not realised, one explanation is the assertion of faulty

implementation". 3. Lack of Coordinated Planning: Lack of coordinated planning leads to policy failure. For example; EDA's terminal project seems to have suffered from lack of coordinated planning. Pressman & Wildavsky (1973), therefore, stated, "One must choose the right implementation plan- one must know the right way to apply the implementation plan". 4. Lack of Standardisation: A policy fails because of failure to follow a standard procedure. For example; EDA's "technical details" did not follow any standard procedure. 5. Intra-agency Antipathies: The arrangement of Mr. E. P. Folly, in charge of the EDA, had created intra-agency antipathies between his task force agents and programme superiors. Such intra-agency antipathy resulted in implementation delay. 6. Complexity of Joint Actions: One of the most important reasons for failure of EDA programme was complexity of joint action. The complexity of joint action happened in number of manners such as: i) Multiplicity of participants and perspectives: A large number of governmental and non-governmental organisations and individuals eventually became involved in the process of implementation. Each of the many participating groups had various perspectives about EDA operation, differences in outlook and sense of urgency, different opinions on leadership and organisational roles. Moreover, they had simultaneous commitment to and preference for other programmes. And, all that led to implementation failure. ii) Multiplicity of decisions and the decreasing probability of program success: When program depends on so many actors, there are numerous possibilities for disagreement and delay. This was the case with EDA. EDA had number of decision and clearance points which prompted implementation delay. In opinion of Pressman and Wildavsky (1973), delays were being caused by the difficulty of obtaining required clearances. iii) Two goals and two decision paths: Rather than moving towards one goal, the EDA program aimed at achieving two major objectives: the construction of public works and the creation of jobs for the hard-core unemployment. Goal displacement was a major cause for EDA's program delay. iv) The emergence of unexpected decisions: Participants' differing perspectives and sense of urgency made it difficult to meet the urgency of number of decisions and clearances required for EDA. v) The anatomy of delay: Implementation delay is a function of number of decision points, the number of participants at each point, and the intensity of their preferences. The combination of delays had kept the EDA program away from realising its potential.

E. Bardach (1977), on the other hand, studied the implementation case of Mental Health Reform in California, USA. Bardach viewed implementation process as a pressure politics (pressure & counter pressures), messing of assent, administrative control process, intergovernmental bargaining, and complexity of joint actions, and features associated with each of the factors headed towards conceptualisation of the process as "a system of loosely related games". Bardach was concerned for those games which have adverse effects on policy implementation or factors that cause implementation delay or implementation

failure. There are four types of adverse effects: (1) the diversion of resources, (2) the deflection of policy goals, (3) the dilemmas of administration, and (4) the dissipation of energies. The characteristics of the diversion of resources include easy money (most individuals and organisations who receive money from the government tend to provide less in the way of exchange), easy life (civil servants are protected by civil service rules, less concerned about their responsibilities), budget game (idea of all the money should be spent) and pork barrel (resources are diverted before implementation even starts or spreads to gain supports). The characteristics of deflection of policy goals include *piling on* (implementers are likely to add more goals), up for grabs (taking undue advantage/success), and *keeping the peace* (act of leaders, not the best leader). The dilemmas of administration include *tokenism* (attempt to appear contributing a policy element publicly but privately conceding a small token gesture), *massive resistance* (evading the responsibility specified in the policy mandate), social entropy (problem of incompetence, problem of variability, insufficient coordination) and the management game (no body's responsibility, no concrete decision). The dissipation of energies includes *tenacity* (concerned people do not want to change), *territory* (*competition for territory, rivalry*), not our problem (*failure to establish clear liability, nobody wants to shoulder the responsibility*), odd man out (*lack of moral authority, actors attempt to create their options and cut their losses in the event of uncertainty*), reputation (personal need and ambition).

Other scholars have talked about the constraints associated with policy implementation. Rossi et al. (2004) stated that many policies are not implemented or executed according to their design. A policy intervention may simply be poorly managed or be compromised by political interference. Sometimes personnel are not available or facilities are inadequate; sometimes frontline implementers are unable to carry out the intervention due to a lack of motivation or expertise. Policy design may also be poorly structured or the original design may not be transmitted well to the staff. Moreover, the indented policy participants may not exist in sufficient numbers or may not be identified precisely or may be found to be non-cooperative. Some scholars confirm that proper implementation of any policy can be seriously undermined due to lack of sufficient resources (Meter & Horn, 1975; Mazmanian & Sabatier, 1989; Brinkerhoff & Crosby, 2002; Lipsky, 2010), lack of incentive (Meter & Horn, 1975; Bridgman & Davis, 2004), lack of a competent staff, implementors' negative disposition (Meter & Horn, 1975), lack of inter-organisational communication (Meter & Horn, 1975; Bridgman & Davis, 2004), lack of professional and technical resources (Goggin, Bowman, Lester, and O'Toole, 1990; Mazmanian & Sabatier, 1989), lack of official commitment to statutory objectives (Mazmanian & Sabatier, 1989), lack of delegation of authority and flexibility (Fox, Bayat, & Ferriera, 2006), lack of sufficient autonomy (Wali, 2010), inter-organisational complexity and conflict (Stocker, 1991), impact of economic, political, and social conditions, etc. (Meter & Horn, 1975), lack of

specified technical know-how, lack of administrative capabilities, in prevalence of self-serving goals of street-level bureaucrats, and absence of administrative willingness (Vedung, 1997), increased demand for services; vague, ambiguous, or conflicting goal expectations; difficulties in goal achievements; and involuntary clients (Lipsky, 2010). Nevertheless, policy implementation is linked with the realities of a specific and dynamic environment and plays an important role in the practical implications of the nature and services rendered (Fox, et al., 2006).

Conclusion: In Search of Strategies for Overcoming Policy Failure

Following are, some key strategies suggested to overcome policy failure or delay.

1. **Good Theoretical Back-up:** It is impossible to implement a policy that is defective in its theoretical conception (Bardach, 1979). EDA is the perfect example as such. Implementation requires appropriate 'causal theory' (Mazmanian & Sabatier, 1989). A good policy should have theoretical validity, and must be formulated based on appropriate theoretical basis. Without proper theoretical validity, a policy will give wrong directions in all ways.
2. **Policy Legitimation:** In order to make progress with implementation, key decision-makers must view the proposed policy as legitimate (Brinkerhoff & Crosby, 2002).
3. **Goals and Objectives:** A policy must have clear, specific, measurable, attainable, rational and time-bound (SMART) goals and objectives. In addition to that, there must be consensus on the set goals and objectives as it is a critical feature of the policy (Meter & Horn, 1974).
4. **Resource Accumulation:** Money is critical in policy implementation and it also requires appropriate human and technical resources (Mazmanian & Sabatier, 1989). In fact, to implement a new policy, human, technical, material and financial resources must be allocated to the effort. There should be steady flow of resources (Brinkerhoff & Crosby, 2002). At the same time, appropriate technology also leads to implementation success.
5. **Mobilising Resources and Actions:** If policy has to achieve results, then resources and actions must be mobilised in the appropriate directions. Mobilisation of resources includes preparation of complete plans, clarification of performance standards and conduct appropriate action plans (Brinkerhoff & Crosby, 2002).
6. **Organisation Design and Modification:** Appropriate organisational design is a necessary condition for successful implementation of a policy. Delegation of authority, harmonious organisation culture will enhance capability of the organisation in implementing a particular policy. Because of the difficulty in establishing new routines or tasks in organisations, it is politically more feasible to create new structures rather than overhaul older one (Brinkerhoff & Crosby, 2002).
7. **Commitment and Skills of Frontline Implementers:** Frontline implementers are the focal resources in policy implementation. They need commitment to policy objectives and necessary skills in using available resources to achieve policy objectives since incompetency of frontline implementers lead to implementation failure (Mazmanian & Sabatier, 1989). Frontline implementers must be motivated in their commitment and must be imparted necessary training so that non-

compliance from their part does not take place. Competent personnel make implementation easier. 8. Make a Check and Balance of the Discretionary Power of the Frontline Implementers: Frontline implementers must enjoy sufficient discretion in discharging their responsibilities but there should be a check and balance between excessive or lack of discretionary power. Check and balance in controlling the behaviour of frontlines will guard against all sorts of intentional non-compliance. 9. Defined Roles & Responsibilities: There should be clear-cut task responsibilities about the concerned actors of policy implementation. This intervention will guard against what Bardach (1979) states, “not our problem”. 10. Reward & Punishment: Introduction of reward and punishment system will help to perform tasks in accordance with standard procedure. 11. Monitoring: Implementation should not be done in isolation. Mechanism for monitoring the implementation process from internal and external authorities will enhance implementation performance. 12. Involvement & Engagement: Involving concerned stakeholders as co-producer and engaging actors in the process will enhance implementation success. 13. Active Leadership: Leadership is the key to policy success. Therefore, experienced and tested leader should be chosen to lead a particular policy intervention. 14. Overcoming Complexity of Joint Actions: Proper measures should be taken to guard against conflicts, contradictory criteria, factions & divisions. 15. Choosing Correct Location: Right location should be chosen for implementation otherwise it will be waste of money and resources.

This paper has significant implications for at least two areas. Firstly, it reminds us about the need for undertaking efforts by the scholars towards producing substantial theories so that policy implementation holds water as a discipline in the domain of public administration. Secondly, it also helps us to revisit some of the major problems of policy implementation and suggest measures to overcome them. In the end, there is reason to argue that successful policy implementation also depends upon having a good theoretical base.

References

- Anderson, J. E. (2010). *Public policy making-An introduction* (7th ed.). Boston MA: Wadsworth.
- Bardach, E. (1977). *The implementation game*. Chicago: University of Chicago press.
- Bempah, B.S.O. (2012). *Policy Implementation: Budgeting and Financial Management Practices of District Health Directorates in Ghana*. Doctoral dissertation, National Institute of Development Administration (NIDA), Bangkok
- Bridgman, P., & Davis, G. (2004). *Australian policy handbook*. Crows Nest, NSW: Allen & Unwin.
- Birkland, T. A. (2005). *An introduction to the policy process theories, concepts, and models of public policy making* (2nd ed). New York: M.E. Sharpe.
- Brinkerhoff, D. W. & Crosby, B. L. (2002). *Managing policy reform*. Bloomfield: Kumarian Press.
- Fox, W., Bayat, S., & Ferriera, N. (2006). Introduction. In W. Fox, S. Bayat, & N. Ferriera (Eds.), *A guide to managing public policy* (pp. ix-xi). Cape Town: Juta & Co.
- Goggin, M. L., Bowman, A. Lester, J. & O’Toole, L. (1990). *Implementation theory and practice: Toward a third generation*. New York: Herper Collins.
- Hill, M. & Hupe, P. (2014). *Implementing public policy: An introduction to the study of operational governance*. London: Sage.
- Lipsky, M. (2010). *Street-level bureaucracy* (expanded edition). New York: Russell Sage Foundation.

- Mazmanian, D. A. & Sabatier, P. A. (1989). *Implementation and public policy*. Lanham: University Press of America.
- Meter, D. S. V., & Horn, C. E. V. (1975). The policy implementation process: A conceptual framework, *Administration and Society*, 6, 445-488.
- Meter, D. S. V., & Horn, C. E. V. (1975). The policy implementation process: A conceptual framework, *Administration and Society*, 6, 445-488.
- McCool, D. C. (1995). The theoretical foundations of policy studies. In Daniel C. McCool 'Public Policy Theories, Models and Concepts: An Anthology' [edt]. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, pp. 1-27.
- Pressman, J. L., & Wildavasky, A. (1973). *Implementation: How great expectations in Washington are dashed in Oakland*. Berkley: University of California Press.
- Pulzl, H. & Treib, O. (2007). Implementing Public policy. In F. Fischer et. al. (eds.) *Handbook of Public Policy Analysis: Theory, Politics and Methods*, Boca Raton, NW: Taylor & Francis Group.
- Raadschelders, J. C. N. (2003). *Government: A Public Administration Perspective*. New York: M.E. Sharpe
- Rossi, P. H., Lipsey, M. W., & Freeman, H. E. (2004). *Evaluation: A systematic approach* (7th ed.). Thousand Oaks: Sage.
- Sabatier, P. A. (1988). An advocacy coalition framework of policy change and role of policy oriented learning therein. *Policy Science*, 21 (2-3): 129-168.
- Simon, C. A. (2010). *Public policy: Preferences and outcomes* [2nd edt]. New York: Pearson Educations.
- Smith, K. B., & Larimer, C. W. (2009). *The public policy primer*. Boulder: Westview Press.
- Stewart, J. J., Hedge, D. M., & Lester, J. P. (2008). *Public policy: An evolutionary approach* (3rd ed.). Boston: Thomsom Wordsworth.
- Stocker, R. P. (1991). *Reluctant partners: Implementing federal policy*. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press.
- Vedung, E. (1997). *Public policy and programme evaluation*. New Brunswick. Transaction Publishers.
- Wacker, J. G. (1998) A Definition of Theory: Research Guidelines for Different Theory-building Research Methods in Operations Management, *Journal of Operations Management*, 16: 361-385.
- Wali, M. A. (2010). *The dynamics of policy implementation in Nigeria*. Bloomington: iUniverse.
- Weimer & Vining (2011). *Policy analysis*. Boston, Longman.

[The final revised version of this paper was received on 12 November 2016]