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Policy Implementation – A synthesis of the Study of Policy Implementation and the Causes of Policy Failure

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Abstract

What is implementation in public policy? What are the determinants of policy implementation and service delivery? What could be learned from the key moments of the study of policy implementation? This policy paper proposes a synthesis of the study of policy implementation and the cause of policy failure. It explains why critical differences often occur between the initially formulated goals of a public policy and the final outputs after its implementation. This insight is extremely important to understand and address the causes of policy failures and improve the policy-making process.

Policy Implementation – A synthesis of the Study of Policy Implementation and the Causes of Policy Failure

1. Introduction[1]

From crime reduction to increasing the percentage of citizens with access to clean water, across governmental sectors as diverse as health, education, international development, etc., there exists a drive to produce quality solutions to address community concerns. From preventative programs intending to reduce rates of aggression among schoolchildren to poverty reduction strategies in least developed countries, to attempts to increase learning outcomes, programs can be formulated with the best of intentions or replicated from the most successful models, yet, they still fail to achieve their goals. Some explanations for policy failure are immediately apparent, but others are harder to pin down in a systematic fashion. The study of implementation attempts to address why and how policies deviate from their desired and expected outcomes by providing frameworks for consideration that apply in a variety of contexts.

Consider, for example, international assistance provided to modernize health infrastructure in El Salvador. Unfortunately, while the intent of the loans offered was good and the course of action seemingly reasonable, the failure to provide resources either to close older facilities or to maintain them led to greater disrepair in the long run (Buse, Mays, and Walt 2005, 121). Another key example of questionable implementation concerns the process that occurs when European Union (EU) legislators attempt to pass policies. A controversial 1996 directive to implement a 48-hour work week was unpalatable to the British government, and while it did ultimately pass in the EU, it was never pursued particularly zealously by national leaders, and thus it was implemented only symbolically (Dimitrakopoulos and Richardson 2001, 5).

The choice of implementation route matters immensely in whether a program succeeds or fails. Durlak and DuPre (2008) conducted a meta-analysis and found several significant results. In one study, monitoring implementation produced an effect three times greater than in cases in which implementation was not monitored. Another study, comprising more than 200 school-based aggression prevention programs, found "implementation was the second most important variable overall, and the most important program feature that influenced outcomes" (330). Yet another study they reviewed found that with closer monitoring of intervention implementation, effectiveness "would have been 12 times more effective" (330). According to Durlak and DuPre (2008), "Results from over quantitative 500 studies offered strong empirical support to the conclusion that the level of implementation affects the outcomes obtained in promotion and prevention programs" (Durlak and DuPre 2008, 327). With the general consensus being that organizations can no longer take a "let it happen" approach to adopting new interventions and programs (Greenhalgh et al. 2004, 593; Fixsen et al. 2009, 532), the study of implementation seeks to systematize the process of taking concepts off the page and into the environments where they can affect individuals and make an impact.

2. What is implementation?

Scholars have differing definitions of what implementation constitutes, which can be largely classified into two categories. Within the policy implementation realm, one of the earliest definitions of implementation is "the ability to forge subsequent links in the causal chain so as to obtain the desired results" (Pressman and Wildavsky 1973, xv). Mazmanian and Sabatier are among the most often cited authors in the field; they define implementation as "the 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, 20). Perhaps the clearest definition of implementation that points both to how important it can be and how much of a gap exists in typical planning models is the one proposed by Wanderman et al. (2008). Current models help uncover "what" needs to happen, be it the creation of an intervention to respond to a specific problem or the type of practices best suited for intervening based on specific contexts. Implementation, on the other hand, "speak[s] to the 'how' these things will happen" (173).

In the realm of implementation science, definitions of implementation focus on how one might produce change through a specific intervention. Implementation is "a specified set of activities designed to put into practice an activity or program of known dimensions…processes are purposeful and are described in sufficient detail such that independent observers can detect the presence and strength of the 'specific set of activities' related to implementation" (Fixsen et al. 2005, 5). Implementation refers to "the early usage activities immediately following the decision to adopt an innovation and ending when the use of an innovation becomes routine practice" (P. W. Meyers, Sivakumar, and Nakata 1999, 297). Durlak and DuPre (2008) view implementation generally as "what a program consists of when it is delivered in a particular setting" (329). Domitrovich et al. (2008) focus on when an entity "has decided to adopt a program, but before it is sustained or formally integrated into a system" (7). Burke, Morris, and McGarrigle (2012) write that "The field of implementation spans nearly every sector and can, therefore, refer to the delivery of any plan or action" (1). It is for this reason that scholars have characterized it as a process (Dimitrakopoulos and Richardson 2001, 2) with "multi-staged, developmental character" (McLaughlin 1987, 176).

There is a fundamental difference between these two definitions, because they originate in different fields. The study of policy implementation developed because the intentions of policymakers were not translating into the desired policy results, and consequently, scholars were motivated to attempt to identify factors along the way which may be responsible for success or failure (Dimitrakopoulos and Richardson 2001; O'Toole 2000; Hill and Hupe 2003; Saetren 2005; Saetren 2014; Winter 2011; Winter 2012). Implementation science is associated with how best to engage in the delivery of specific innovations (Nilsen et al. 2013, 5; Greenhalgh et al. 2004, 610; Grol and Jones 2000). Emerging from the healthcare field in the wake of the desire for evidence-based practices, implementation science focuses on specific objects, e.g., ensuring compliance with health and hygiene standards (Nilsen et al. 2013, 5). Regardless of definition, authors in both fields have generated lists of variables that can affect the success of implementation (Wandersman et al. 2008; Durlak and DuPre 2008; Pressman and Wildavsky 1984; Domitrovich et al. 2008; Fixsen et al. 2005; Fixsen et al. 2009; D. C. Meyers, Durlak, and Wandersman 2012). Findings from implementation science are highly quantitative, because isolation of dependent and independent variables is straightforward, as opposed to studies in policy implementation, which tend to rely on natural experiments (Nilsen et al. 2013, 5).

3. The Study of Change and Implementation

3.1. Definitions

As change and implementation have multiple definitions, a conceptual clarification is necessary before moving forward to the evolution of the study of implementation.

3.1.1. Policy Change

Descriptions of change vary, but in the context of politics, change is defined as "incremental shifts in existing structures or new and innovative policies." Bennett and Howlett (1992) describe policy change as "incremental shifts in existing structures, or new and innovative policies."[2]

There is extensive research on policy change. The concept of path dependence put forth by Pierson (2000, p. 252) helps to explain structurally why change is often so difficult. Institutions and policies are engineered in a manner that discourages change, and policies can remain consistent for long periods of time. For example, Pierson (2000, 256) points to the work of North (1990), who explains the lack of institutional convergence between poor countries and rich countries to be a function of adaptation—people adapt to policies that exist, not the other way around. As a result, even objectively bad policies have an advantage over new ones, particularly if they have been present for a long time (Cerna 2013, 3–4). According to Pierson (2000),

Specific patterns of timing and sequence matter; starting from similar conditions, a wide range of social outcomes may be possible; large consequences may result from relatively «small» or contingent events; particular courses of action, once introduced, can be virtually impossible to reverse; and consequently, political development is often punctuated by critical moments or junctures that shape the basic contours of social life. (Collier and Collier 1991; Ikenberry 1994; Krasner 1989) (252)

The advocacy coalition framework (ACF) put forth by Sabatier (1998) views coalitions of like-minded actors as the basic units competing to resolve a policy problem. The advocacy coalition framework is ideally situated for circumstances where there are a large number of actors in conflict, with little certainty about the nature of the problem. According to Cerna (2013), the ACF "… specifies that there are sets of core ideas about causation and value in public policy; these coalitions form because certain interests are linked to them. It is possible to map these networks of actors within a policy sector" (Cerna 2013, 5). According to Nilsen (Nilsen et al. 2013, 3), "the Advocacy Coalition Framework represents an attempt to reject a focus on implementation as a discrete stage of a policy cycle and, instead, theorizes the relationship between a huge number of governmental and non-governmental actors (driven by the desire to translate their beliefs into policy) at multiple levels, as policy changes over a decade or more [50, 51]" (Nilsen et al. 2013, 3).

Head and Alford (2013) describe the different types of structures used to spur change in the public sector.

Managerialism—best characterized as "managing for results"—entails orienting the public-sector organization's structure, coordination mechanisms, financial management, staffing, and rewards toward the achievement of results, broadly conceived as either sets of program purposes or as groups of people served by programs. (Head and Alford 2013)

Central to managerialism has been a rational-technical approach to making decisions, adopting

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2. Cerna 2013, p. 4

corporate strategy methods from the private sector. Initially, this took the form of rational comprehensive planning—the very phenomenon to which Rittel and Webber's original paper was a response. It entailed formulating corporate objectives for the organization, delineating discrete programs related to those objectives, setting out clear outcomes for each program, drawing up action plans for achieving those outcomes, and measuring the extent of achievement at regular intervals (Frederickson & Frederickson, 2006; Radin, 2006). This model assumes that each public organization has settled goals, a supportive political environment, and control over the resources and capabilities necessary to deliver on the goals—none of which necessarily apply in the presence of wicked problems. (Head and Alford 2013)

To the extent that performance-based managerialism moves away from a focus on inputs and processes, and focuses the attention further down the chain of "program logic" toward outcomes, managerialism potentially allows flexibilities in finding alternative means of achieving the desired results. But to the extent that it holds managers responsible for a specific set of programs or for serving a specific set of clients, the corporate management framework tends to isolate from each other those programs that may actually have subterranean connections in respect of certain wicked problems. This fragmentation manifests itself in tensions between program-based subcultures, competing policy priorities, and, at worst, turf wars within and between agencies. (Head and Alford 2013)

3.1.2. Policy Implementation

Policy implementation is complicated. Various contextual factors can derail otherwise ideal implementation practice, and given the nature of the field, controlled experiments are not likely representations of real world implementation scenarios. Attempts to understand policy implementation better by isolating specific variables have not been characterized by success; deLeon and deLeon (2002) wrote:

> …Meier and McFarlane (1995) tested the Mazmanian and Sabatier model through a series of ingenious measures and found that many of the posited relationships were statistically significant. However, they were forced to conclude that the "operationalization of several of the variables was independent problematic. Admittedly, some of our own measures are crude, and there is a reasonable distance between the measures selected and the broad concepts embodied in the statutory variables" (p. 294). (deLeon and deLeon 2002, 475)

Yet other scholars have attempted to come up with policy implementation theories. Despite decades of implementation research, scholars have agreed that implementation is far too complex to be accounted for by a single theory (Winter 2011, 24). Additionally, implementation is inextricably linked to other parts of the policy process, and implementation research is "often performed under labels other than 'implementation' such as (new) governance, policy design and instruments, network studies, outsourcing, public-private partnerships, street-level bureaucracy, management, 'new public management,' principal-agent studies, performance, regulatory enforcement, and compliance" (Winter 2011, 25).

3.2. Early Research

Pressman and Wildavsky (1973) pioneered several concepts in implementation research, focusing on the generation of theories developed from case studies, such as their famous explanation of the failure of a unemployment reduction program for ethnic minority groups in Oakland. (Pressman and Wildavsky 1973) viewed the "complexity of joint action" in conjunction with the many points of decision and veto as

presenting a strong barrier to successful implementation (Winter 2011, 9). For example, they postulated that the greater the number of decision points—or places where individuals must reach agreement—the more difficult implementation would be (Pressman and Wildavsky 1973, xvi). Their research, along with that of authors such as Bardach (1977), who advocated for greater control to remedy unpredictability, set the stage for the models that would be developed in the coming years.

3.3. Top-down policy implementation models

These models (Sabatier 1986; Mazmanian and Sabatier 1989) use the decision of an authority as a starting point, identifying the tractability[3] of the problem and the ability to structure implementation, as well as the non-statutory variables affecting implementation. Most top-down models advise governments to have clear and consistent goals, to limit the extent of change necessary, and to place the responsibility for implementation with an agency sympathetic with the policy's goals. These models regularly neglect prior context and political aspects, as if the implementation were only a matter of administration, depending only on the availability of resources. Moreover, these models tend to focus on the entity crafting the policy, rather than those affected by it (Cerna 2013, 18), and ignore the role of policy opponents, who make demands in the policy process (Moe 1989, 277).

Bowen (1982) adopts the same notion of implementation success as Pressman and Wildavsky, but "points at persistence, packaging of clearances, engineering bandwagons and policy reduction, as tactics actually employed in implementation" (Hupe 2011, 70). For Bowen, "persistence refers to the likelihood that repeated efforts to gain each needed clearance – although at the expense of delay – may enhance implementation. Packaging implies that one negotiation entails a number of clearances needed for several programme elements. Bandwagons refer to the situation in which each clearance obtained increases the probability of the next one. An agreement as a result of one negotiation enhances other clearances. Policy reduction entails the differentiation of a policy programme into several parts to be treated separately" (Hupe 2011, 70).

Top-down policy implementation models have largely fallen out of favor because of assumptions that have been disproven. In essence, top-down models assume that policymakers can master control of the policy implementation environment (Elmore 1979, 603). According to Head and Alford (2013), "rational-technical approaches assume that efficient and effective achievement of objectives can follow from adequate information, carefully specified goals and targets, and choice of appropriate methods" (Head and Alford 2013). These models have been subject to extensive critique, particularly in Rittel and Webbers (1973), "Dilemmas in a General Theory of Planning," which declared that "the days of solving major problems through an 'engineering' approach have ended. Modern society was now seen as pluralistic rather than homogeneous, and not amenable to top-down general solutions. Social groups increasingly exhibit important differences in aspirations, values, and perspectives that confound the possibility of clear and agreed solutions" (Head and Alford 2013).

3.4. Bottom-up policy implementation models

These models (Maynard Moody et al. 1990; Hjern and Hull 1982; Elmore 1979; Lipsky 1980) view policy from the perspective of target population and the service deliverers. In his theory of street-level bureaucrats, Lipsky (1980) writes that the discretion of those who are relied upon to implement policy in the field is a key factor in successful implementation. Rather than implementing policies with fidelity, each street-level bureaucrat is forced to adapt a policy mandate aiming as far as possible to circumnavigate varying resource

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3. Factors which affect the targeted groups and the degree of change needed (cf. Burke, Morris, and McGarrigle 2012, 13).

constraints. Bottom-up theorists tend to believe that centralized decision-making is poorly adapted to local conditions and flexibility is important to reach goals. They are usually criticized as overemphasizing local autonomy and favoring administrative accountability over democratic accountability and the ability of policy leaders to structure local behaviors. For example, (Hjern, Hanf, and Porter 1977; Hjern and Hull 1982) start at the bottom, identifying the goals of actors involved in the intervention delivery process. By tracing the network of stakeholders involved in the policy delivery process, they conclude that those responsible for implementation (e.g., the front-line service deliverers) are more important to success than centralization or top-down administration.

One difference between the top-down and bottom-up approaches is the metrics that are selected for evaluation. Top-down models typically see legislative objectives as the metric that should determine success or failure. Top-down models, e.g., (Mazmanian and Sabatier 1983), see evaluation as determinant on goals achievement (Sabatier 1986, 33). Bottom-up approaches also use legislative objectives to assess policy success or failure, but explain that the gap between legislative (top-down) objectives and resources changes the nature of implementation. The bottom-up evaluation component has been criticized as overly vague, but conversely, the focus on the top may overemphasize government (Sabatier 1986, 33–34). Some authors who write on the bottom-up approach reject the legislative objective as a standard for evaluation and typically develop their own set of standards they carefully justify (Winter 2012, 7).

3.5. Synthesis of top-down and bottom-up approaches

Over time, scholars began to recognize the value of the top-down and bottom-up approaches and made a major attempt to combine them into a comprehensive explanatory approach. For example, Sabatier and Mazmanian (1979) establish a list of criteria that enable successful implementation. According to Cerna (2013), "…these include: 1. The programme is based on a sound theory related to changes in target group behavior. 2. Policy decisions have to contain unambiguous policy directives and structure the implementation process in a way that increases the chances of good performance of target groups. 3. The leaders and implementing agencies require significant managerial and political skills and commitment to the goals. 4. The programme also needs to be supported by organized constituency groups and few key legislators throughout the process. 5. The priority of objectives is not undermined over time by conflicting public policies or changes in socio-economic conditions" (Cerna 2013, 22).

Matland's (1995) ambiguity-conflict model is a synthesis of the top-down and bottom-up schools of implementation. According to Matland, "Policy implementation occurs on two levels (Berman 1978). At the macroimplementation level, centrally located actors devise a government program; at the microimplementation level, local organizations react to the macrolevel plans, develop their own programs, and implement them" (Matland 1995, 149). Broadly speaking, there are two primary factors that help explain the success or failure of implementing various policies. These factors are the degree of policy ambiguity and the degree of policy conflict. These factors are best conceptualized as interrelated axes, where the domestic context of each country determines the placement of specific policies within an implementation matrix. The degree of policy conflict is based on an understanding of human beings as rational and self-interested actors, which, as interests regularly diverge, usually provoke a state of conflict. The policy ambiguity evolves when goals or means to a related policy are unclear. When the levels of both conflict and ambiguity are low, the implementation is administrative and will be successful if resources are available. When the levels of both conflict and ambiguity are high, the implementation is symbolic, and its success will depend on the strength of the coalition. When the conflict is high and the ambiguity low, the implementation is political, and power is the prime determinant of a successful implementation. Finally, when conflict is low and the ambiguity high, the implementation is experimental and will depend

on contextual conditions.

The central tenets of Matland's model continue to be re-interpreted by modern scholars. Head and Alford (2013) suggest a new taxonomy for the implementation discussion, suggesting that we are attempting to address "wicked problems."[4] For Head and Alford (2013), implementations can be divided into three types. Type 1 or "tame" problems consist of circumstances where "both the definition of the problem and the likely solution are clear to the decision maker (e.g., the manager or policy expert). These situations require technical work on the part of decision makers and those subject to their decisions" (7). Effectively, this is similar to a low-conflict low-ambiguity implementation described by Matland (1995). Head and Alford, again, argue that "…tame problems are those currently regarded as capable of standard or routine solutions. They have low levels of complexity and disputation and thus low perceived levels of uncertainty" (7).

3.6 Rational Choice Models

These models use the assumption of fixed preferences and rational behavior to identify why policies succeed or fail. According to Cerna (2013) and Hall and Taylor (1996), "interactions between actors determine political outcomes" (19). According to (Winter 2011, 19) "Citizens' and firms' responses to public policy implementation are based on their individual action model according to which their behaviors are influenced by their ability and motivations" (19). O'Toole (1995) examines game theory as a potential avenue for enhancing cooperation, finding the advantages of viewing implementation through the lens of game theory, including multiple points of potential engagement for managers along the implementation process, and being able to see and influence various behaviors that can facilitate cooperation. Conversely, such a perspective requires actors to have a great degree of information, which is often lacking, particularly given a lack of institutionalization (O'Toole, 1995, 54). Rational choice approaches are better suited for understanding decisions after the fact, rather than identifying how preferences came about (John, 2003, 485; Cerna, 2013, 20–21).

3.7. Governance Approaches

3.7.1. Implementation Phases

Synthesis across the implementation literature has produced a variety of publications documenting the phases of successful implementation. According to Sabatier and Mazmanian (1980, 553), there are five distinct stages in the implementation process. First, there are the policy outputs and decisions of implementing agencies. Second, there is the compliance of targeted groups with the decisions made. Third, there are the realized impacts of policy decisions. Fourth, there are the perceived impacts of policy decisions. Finally, there is the political system's evaluation of a statute in terms of major revisions in its content.[5] In their attempt to classify the literature, Fixsen et al. (2005; Fixsen et al. 2009) describe a six-phase process of exploration and adoption, program installation, initial implementation, full operation, innovation, and sustainability. The first phase, exploration and adoption, is the process of identifying needs and crafting a strategy to resolve an identified deficit, such as the adoption of an evidence-based program. The installation stage includes the development of goals, ensuring access to funding, and adapting the organization as required, such as by hiring more staff. The initial implementation is described as the complex process of organizational change. Full operation occurs when the implementation strategy succeeds at integrating

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4. Wicked problems are "those that are complex, unpredictable, open ended, or intractable» (Head and Alford 2013).

5. "Based on Sabatier and Mazmanian (1980, 553), it is also significant to keep in mind that different stages in the implementation process exist: 1. The policy outputs (decisions) of implementing agencies 2. The compliance of target groups with those decisions 3. The actual impacts of agency decisions 4. The perceived impacts of those decisions 5. The political system's evaluation of a statute in terms of major revisions in its content" (Cerna 2013, 23).

the intervention into routine operations. The final two stages, innovation and sustainability, focus on what happens throughout the life cycle of the intervention, such as how the program can be adapted even further to serve the targeted population better.

Perhaps the most complete framework, (D. C. Meyers, Durlak, and Wandersman 2012, 7) describe their 14-step synthesis as the "quality implementation framework" (QIF) incorporating four phases: initial considerations about the host setting, creating an implementation structure, the ongoing structure post-start, and improving future applications. Specifically, their model attempts to isolate specific processes that should take place through the development of a particular program. For example, in the first phase, assessments of the various contextual factors, such as organizational capacity, should take place. After evaluation, potential ways to adapt the intervention should be considered, along with ways to enhance organizational capacity generally in anticipation of implementation. This might mean ensuring that all individuals are trained in using a certain software or that the necessary additional staff are hired. Each of the elements of the QIF can generally be considered to address variables that lead to implementation success or failure.

3.7.2. Interactive Systems Framework (ISF)

With so many potential implementation variables, there is often a lack of clarity on what specifically should be done at various implementation stages. Some authors argue that policy implementation is too complex for any single model to predict correctly (Wanna, Butcher, and Freyen, 2010), which led authors such as Wandersman et al. (2008) to develop a model referred to as the "interactive systems framework" (ISF) that attempts to harmonize implementation stages. While intended for the use of preventative interventions, e.g., in healthcare, its arguments broadly apply to other types of implementation work. Any intervention requires its components to be accessible and demonstrably useful. (Wandersman et al. 2008) refer to this as the process of "translation and synthesis" of practices often reported on in literature into a user-friendly package (175). As the intervention is put into place, other strategies must be deployed. The second component of the model is the prevention delivery system, which attempts to link synthesis, translation, capacity, and training with the contextual variances that exist across various implementation sites through the various entities that deploy innovations. Finally, the prevention support system emphasizes general capacity building in order to ensure basic organizational strength, combined with specific training and assistance that addresses the intervention (Wandersman et al. 2008, 176). Durlak and DuPre (2008) expand upon the ISF framework and focus primarily on two components: the prevention delivery system, which they view as methods relating to organizational capacity, and the prevention support system, which they view as relating to training and technical assistance. These two areas are surrounded by three groups of variables: characteristics relating to the innovation, to the provider, and to the community.

In later publications, (Wandersman, Chien, and Katz 2012)a new technology, program, or policy refine the ISF model to incorporate greater focus on the link between intervention delivery and support through what they define as the EBSIS, the Evidence-Based System for Innovation Support. In many ways, the addition of EBSIS to the ISF produces a framework similar to the QIF described above. Both frameworks involve a phased approach—the ISF with the addition of EBSIS focuses on goal and capacity identification early in the process, just as the QIF does. The four support components described, i.e., tools, training, technical assistance, and quality assurance/improvement (QA/QI), as they interface with the Getting To Outcomes (GTO) framework (Wandersman et al. 2000), replicate various steps of the QIF, e.g., addressing fit, necessary resources, etc. The incorporation of EBSIS into the ISF does more to provide specific strategies on how policymakers can improve outcomes than to act as a descriptive framework explaining why implementation succeeds or fails.

3.7.3. Core Components

Another distinct manner of looking at implementation relies on examining the specific components rather than the process. Core implementation components can be defined as the specific drivers that produce a high-quality and successful implementation. Note that this is different from how some authors refer to the term. For example, (Domitrovich et al. 2008) define core components as the specific mechanisms of change of an intervention, e.g., interactive delivery methods. In the context of implementation models, core components exist regardless of the quality of the program being implemented and are integrated processes that each contribute to success (Fixsen et al. 2009, 533). According to (Fixsen et al. 2009), there are seven core implementation components: staff selection, pre-service and in-service training, ongoing coaching and consultation, staff performance assessment, decision support data systems, facilitative administration supports, and systems intervention.

According to (Fixsen et al. 2005, 12), implementation has five elements—source, destination, communication link, and feedback mechanism—that function as part of a sphere of influence. The source describes the particular intervention to be implemented, e.g., an evidence-based program. The destination is characterized as where the intervention is to be implemented, e.g., with an applicant. The communication link is the process of change via knowledge delivery and transfer by what some authors describe as "change agents" or "purveyors" (Fixsen et al. 2005, 14). The feedback mechanism is routine evaluative information collected to guide implementation efforts. In totality, the four other components sit suspended within a sphere of influence, which often comprises a multiplicity of actors and interests.

4. Causes of failure?

4.1. Ambiguity

The level of ambiguity in a particular intervention will often determine the degree of success implementation will have and how replicable results across various sites will be (Matland 1995; Veronesi and Keasey 2015, 563). According to Matland (1995), there are different types of ambiguity, which fall into two categories, "ambiguity of goals and ambiguity of means. In top-down models goal clarity is an important independent variable that directly affects policy success. Goal ambiguity is seen as leading to misunderstanding and uncertainty and therefore often is culpable in implementation failure. The position of top-downers is quite explicit—policies should be pushed in the direction of greater goal clarity" (Matland 1995, 158–59).

As opposed to ambiguity of means, which gives rise to policy conflict, in this section we focus on ambiguity inherent in the goals themselves, abstracted from how to achieve them. According to Zhan et al. (2014),

> …goal ambiguity…influences policy implementation in many ways—for example, larger variations in how the policy is implemented and the actors that are involved in different sites. Goal ambiguity affects bureaucratic behaviors and organizational performance (Chun and Rainey 2005). As noted by Matland (1995), in the implementation literature, especially in studies that adopt a top-down perspective, goal ambiguity has been traditionally considered a major cause of implementation failures because goal ambiguity may create uncertainty and misunderstanding. But he argues that from a policy-making perspective, goal ambiguity may not always be "bad" because goal clarity may sometimes intensify conflicts between groups, leading to a lack of support for the policy. (Zhan et al 2014, 1012)

Pressman and Wildavsky (1984) view ambiguity as problematic, because it will leave implementers responsible for interpreting policies, which could lead to drifting away from the intent of the intervention. As (Hupe 2011) illustrates, hanging a picture on a wall conjures ideas of many potential avenues, but the added instruction of not harming the wall limits the paths towards success and in doing so, provides a concrete way forward (69).

> The more unambiguously formulated the goals of a public policy or policy programme are, the clearer the implemendum will be. The more clear what needs to be implemented—"a policy, naturally," as Pressman and Wildavsky (1984: xxi) state—the less variation in interpretation will occur. Formulated in household terms the objective of hanging a painting on the wall leaves greater choice for the technical way to do that, than when the objective is accompanied by the addition "while damaging the wall as little as possible." Task ambiguity and complexity are at stake here (cf. Matland, 1995). (Hupe 2011, 69)

But scholars agree that ambiguity is inevitable. Few policies are designed by one actor thinking rationally (Hupe 2011, 71; Wildavsky 1979). Some interventions have a degree of ambiguity baked in by design, so that they will succeed at placating opponents in the policy formulation process (Zhan, Lo, and Tang 2014, 1012). For example, Zhan et al. note, "Pandey and Wright (2006) further argue that goal ambiguity in public organizations may be 'inevitable' because they must respond to multiple external stakeholders, especially when the levels of policy complexity and political conflicts are high" (Zhan et al 2014, 1012). Ambiguity can also come from the process of implementation. Head and Alford (2013) note, "These difficulties may arise from intricate interdependencies of processes and structures, uncertainties inherent in the dynamic nature of social issues and processes, the incommensurability of potential risks, and the diversity of stakeholders" (Koppenjan & Klijn 2004, 7). Winter (2012) elaborates that even the concept of measuring whether goals are achieved can be problematic, since the nature of politics indicates some policies are formulated ambiguously and the goals in plain sight may be subsumed by "latent goals" or other priorities altogether (Matland 1995; deLeon and deLeon 2002; Nilsen et al. 2013, 7; Ingram 1990; Rein and Rabinovitz 1975)—which is problematic for scholars like Goggin (1990), who insist on goal clarity.

The ambiguity problem is connected to a variety of strategies scholars generally agree help ensure "good" implementation. Take, for example, the evaluation of a policy as it is implemented. Matland (1995) notes that "Statutory mandates often are exceedingly vague. They do not incorporate specific goals and they fail to provide reasonable yardsticks with which to measure policy results. Broader evaluation standards need to be used when significant ambiguity exists regarding the specific goals of a policy…. For example, efficiency gains and economic growth may be used in one case, whereas enhanced support of the political system may be valid in another. Increased understanding and alleviation of local problems are two measures of success that frequently are likely to be relevant" (Matland 1995, 156).

Furthermore, Hupe (2011) adds that with ambiguity the very nature of policy success or failure can be called into question. He states, "With ambiguous policy goals not only implementation may vary, but evaluation, too…. The point is that given the political nature of policy formation in most public policy processes, policy goals laid down in official documents often will be compromises, and therefore susceptible to multiple interpretations. [Several authors have] shown that most public policies can hardly be explained as rational decisions of single policy designers" (Hupe 2011, 71). Politics is significantly involved.

4.2. Implementers at the Front Lines

There is often difficulty rectifying the discontinuity that exists between how policies are formulated and how they are actually implemented. According to Winter (2011), "Principal-agent theory offers a promising way for studying these relationships. According to its basic assumptions, a principal (manager) and his or her bureaucratic agents may not share all preferences, and the relationship is characterized by information asymmetry that systematically disadvantage principals" (Winter 2011, 15).

Zhan et al. (2014) highlight how a lack of vertical participation in the implementation of policies can pose problems. Using China as a case study, Zhan and colleagues examine what they define as "an inherent problem with a governance framework that combines centralized political authority with decentralized administration, in which central officials may have unchallenged authority but lack the institutional and organizational means to ensure that their decisions are fully implemented" (Zhan et al. 2014, 1030). More specifically, "a lack of stakeholder participation in rulemaking creates implementation difficulties (West 2005). The environmental policy implementation gap in China is not quite surprising as mechanisms for democratic participation in rulemaking have not been well established. For many years, China's environmental policy pronouncements have been frequently criticized as mere 'symbolic gestures.' Recently, the Chinese central government, under pressure from both local citizens and the international community (Li and Chan 2009), has been active in promulgating environmental laws and regulations, but their implementation has mainly been the responsibilities of local EPBs" (Zhan et al 2014, 1029).

These concerns develop out of the literature of Lipsky (1980) and his theory of how much discretion and influence what he terms "street-level bureaucrats" have over policy success (or failure). Put succinctly, "street-level bureaucrats are responsible for many of the most central activities of public agencies, from determining program eligibility to allocating benefits, judging compliance, imposing sanctions, and exempting individuals and businesses from penalties. Because these activities involve direct interactions with citizens, street-level bureaucrats also exercise considerable discretion" (Meyers and Nielsen 2012, 308).

Other factors are magnified by the degree of discretion held by front-line implementers—those who serve as "street level bureaucrats" or the last link in the implementation chain. Take for example the availability of resources. Meyers and Nielsen (2012) remark,

> A number of studies have identified resource constraints as a key influence on the extent and direction of front-line discretion. Street-level bureaucrats have been observed to cope with chronically limited time and other resources by rationing services, discriminating in the provision of services to more cooperative clients, and rationalizing program objectives (Pesso, 1978; Lipsky, 1980; Keiser and Soss, 1998; Keiser, 1999, 2010; Winter, 2001). As Brodkin (1997: 24) observes, "Caseworkers, like other lower-level bureaucrats, do not do just what they want or just what they are told to want. They do what they can." Ironically, efforts to cope with limited time and other resources may lead to either inconsistent and particularistic treatment of similar clients, or routinized treatment of clients with dissimilar needs (Weatherley and Lipsky, 1977; Pesso, 1978; [p. 309] Hagen, 1987; Brodkin, 1995, 1997). The importance of resources has been noted also in studies of the regulatory effort of government inspectors (Winter, 2000). (Meyers and Nielsen 2012, 312)

But this amplifying phenomenon is not just limited to resource constraints. Policy ambiguity is also exacerbated by high levels of discretion. Meyers and Nielsen further note, "when policy makers' goals are

unclear, contested or contradictory, front-line workers are more likely to make discretionary decisions that favor their own values and beliefs (Meyers et al., 2001; Riccucci et al., 2004; Keiser, 2010)." (Meyers and Nielsen 2012:311). Matland (1995) remarks:

> Decentralization should occur within a context of central control. Street-level bureaucrats do have great discretion in their interactions with clients. To proceed from this fact to theorize that because such flexibility exists it should serve as the basis for designing policy, however, is to turn the role of theory on its head (Linder and Peters 1987). It effectively equates description with prescription. Flexibility and autonomy might be appropriate when the goals of the policy formulators and implementers are the same, but if they differ greatly, flexibility and autonomy may lead to policies which result in lower performance on official goals. (Matland 1995, 151)

This is significant because the general structure of governments does not regard these front-line implementers as having the degree of discretion they ultimately hold, and thus lack the accountability structures necessary to constrain their behavior. Meyers and Nielsen (2012) state, "The most obvious governance concern is the potential of street-level bureaucrats to undermine the goals of elected officials. Because street-level bureaucrats are neither elected nor appointed by elected officials, they are largely immune to electoral accountability. To the extent that elected officials cannot fully control street-level bureaucrats' day-to-day decisions and actions, citizens have few mechanisms for assessing, much less controlling, their impact on policy. Policy goals may be displaced or distorted when front-line workers focus their energies on managing workloads, coping with job demands, or pursuing their own ideological, policy, or political interests (e.g., Lipsky, 1980; Sandfort, 2000; Winter, 2000)" (Meyers and Nielsen 2012, 316).

There is little research on whether or not the effects of high levels of discretion among front-line bureaucrats can be mitigated or reshaped through a top-down approach. Winter (2011) has noted, "In a meta-analysis, George Boyne [found] surprisingly few studies on effects of management on performance or outcomes. Yet he finds some evidence that management does matter. However, because such studies measure the direct link between management and outcomes, it is hard to know through what kinds of street-level bureaucratic practices managers can bring about better outcomes. Some causal links are missing. Unfortunately, so far, very few studies have examined the effects of management on street-level bureaucratic behaviors. Most studies indicate that these effects are limited and context contingent… Having an effective manager does not always result in better implementation. Sometimes street-level bureaucrats experience a multiple principal problem…" (Winter 2011, 15).

4.3. Funding and Resources

Access to available funding and resources is a precondition for successful implementation. While funding alone will not generate success, without it there is often an inability to mobilize other aspects of an implementation strategy. Stable funding is an instrumental necessity to successful implementation (Durlak and DuPre 2008, 336). One-time grant funding is less likely to produce a program that is consistently supported than funding that is repetitive (Greenhalgh et al. 2004, 608). Funding entities must recognize that successful implementation takes time and not withhold resources. Domitrovich et al. (2008) note that systemic interventions in schools took three to five years to achieve stated goals. But funding and resources are not the same thing. When staff, services, other support functions, or even time are elements of the implementation process, their absence will prevent success. As a general principle, Dimitrakopoulos and Richardson (2001, 4) argue that resources need to be made available for implementation to succeed. They also need to be available in the right combination. Citing a policy within the EU that national governments must match EU spending, Dimitrakopoulos and Richardson (2001, 4) note that the unavailability of matched

national funding could hinder the project—or even if funding exists, there could easily be a knowledge gap between EU policymakers and national policymakers.

4.4. Politics and Conflict

As demonstrated, the literature surrounding policy implementation suggests that "what counts as a problem and what counts as a solution are heavily shaped by institutional history and stakeholder perspectives (e.g., Kingdon, 1995; Sabatier, 2007)…. In a world of constrained or 'bounded' rationality (Jones, 1999), lack of consensus reflects differences in values and experience; appeals to scientific expertise will seldom generate acceptable solutions. Calls for more rigorous use of evidence in policy making demonstrate the inherent difficulties of achieving consensus about the knowledge bases required to address complex problems" (Head and Alford 2013).

This social interaction character makes the result of policy formation in a policy process an ambiguous, multi-interpretable basis for the subsequent "stage," the sub-process of implementation. Instead of resulting "from a single blueprint as if designing a house" (May, 2002: 224), a policy programme almost by definition is the result of "policy politics" (226). (Hupe 2011, 72)

For conflict to exist, there must be an interdependence of actors, an incompatibility of objectives, and a perceived zero-sum element to the interactions (Dahrendorf 1958). Policy conflict will exist when more than one organization sees a policy as directly relevant to its interests and when the organizations have incongruous views. Such differences can arise regarding either the professed goals of a policy or the programmatic activities that are planned to carry out a policy. Disputes over policy means can develop over jurisdictional issues or over the substance of the proposed means for reaching the goals. For example, pollution…. Many top-down authors have treated conflict as an endogenous variable that policy designers can influence and should minimize. Virtually, all have emphasized on the importance of delegating policy to a sympathetic agency. Placing a policy in an agency where it conflicts with existing policies and goals leads to few resources, little support, and almost certain failure. (Matland 1995, 158)

Conflict plays a central role in distinguishing between decision-making models; it is just as relevant when distinguishing between descriptions of the implementation process. Both rational and bureaucratic politics models of decision making assume that individual actors are rationally self-interested. They differ, however, on the degree of goal congruence that exists…. The bargaining process does not lead to an agreement on goals, rather it focuses entirely on reaching an agreement on actions (means). Often the process culminates in no action, because actors are unable to reach agreement. (Matland 1995, 157)

Low ambiguity and high conflict are typical of political models of decision making (Allison 1971; Halperin 1974; Elmore 1978). Actors have clearly defined goals, but dissension occurs because these clearly defined goals are incompatible. Equally conflictual battles can occur over means. It is often precisely in the designing of the implementation policy that conflicts develop and vigorous battles erupt. The central principle n political implementation is that implementation outcomes are decided by power. In some cases one actor or a coalition of actors have sufficient power to force their will on other participants. In other cases actors resort to bargaining to reach an agreement. (Matland 1995, 164)

5. Conclusion

This policy note serves as a synthesis of previous policy literature and as a discussion on the causes of policy failure. In the above section, we demonstrated that there are many models for policy implementation, as well as several different models that theorize policy failures. The second part of this policy briefing will address the question: What matters for successful policy implementation, and what can policy leaders do?

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