

# Methodological Problems in Implementation Research

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## Summary

Three schools of thought are present in implementation theory, the rationalists', the bargainers' and the rejectionists'. Central to the study of implementation is the realisation of social versus economic goals, the maintenance of the legitimacy of the state, and the role of "planning" in the process. An eclectic methodology drawn from all three schools is necessary. Research should look at three basic processes: restructuring, mopping-up and redistribution, and the relationship between them. Research should be "bottom-up" as well as "top-down", and should look at what actually happens on the ground, placing "policy" and "implementation" in that context. Research using such a methodology shows, a lack of knowledge by actors, an unclear policy/implementation link, implementation affected by the content of policy, and helplessness in the face of the power of "the economic".

## Résumé

Trois écoles de pensée se confrontent en ce qui concerne la mise en œuvre: celle des rationalistes, celle des "négociateurs" et celle des critiques. Au cœur de l'étude de la mise en œuvre on trouve la réalisation des buts sociaux et économiques, le maintien de la légitimité de l'Etat, et la fonction de la planification. Une méthodologie éclectique qui s'inspire des trois écoles s'impose. Il faut tenir compte de trois processus fondamentaux: la restructuration, l'adaptation, la redistribution, ainsi que de leurs relations. La recherche doit être tant ascendante (*bottom-up*) que descendante (*top-down*) et doit tenir compte de ce qui se passe effectivement sur le terrain en plaçant la politique et la mise en œuvre dans ce contexte. La recherche appliquant cette méthodologie montre que les acteurs sont mal informés, que les rapports entre politique et mise en œuvre sont faibles, que la mise en œuvre est influencée par le contenu de la politique, que l'économie est toute puissante.

## 1. The problem

Theory and prescription are never very far from each other in the public policy disciplines. The wish to study the implementation process

is itself moulded by the policy orientation of the analyst.

Three schools of thought can be characterised by their attitudes to the operation of the state and to its governability. There are those reformists who see the state as in need of an injection of further systems, of more planning or more rationality, the main method being the "top-down" approach to research. (Simon, 1947; Sabatier & Maxmanian, 1979). They assume that policy is formed at the centre and that, through an implementation process which is more, or less, appropriately designed, it will produce the desired final result where and when it is needed. Much of the US policy sciences and the UK administrative school has been of this kind. Included in this school are the rationalists, the incrementalists, and those Marxists who view the state as a means to introduce socialism (Pressman & Wildavsky, 1973).

The second school of reformists believe that the state has become too centralist, too rigid and that the rationalist model does not reflect reality. They urge a loosening up of the system, a legitimisation of politics with a small "p" and the acknowledgment of bargaining as a necessary characteristic of implementation. The "bottom-up" method is fashionable among this school (Barrett & Fudge, 1981; Lipsky, 1978). It includes most recent writers on implementation. They have found ambiguity in policy (Jones, 1977), and that power and interests (Lukes, 1974) can determine actions just as much as rational systems. They have become interested in decentralisation (Ashford, 1979; Bassand & Fragnière, 1976), the introduction of conflict resolution (Niskanen, 1973) and the idea of networking (Hjern & Porter, 1981) to avoid the dysfunctionalisties of bureaucracy. They have discovered that the state does not work as its supporters would think and they seek for a modification of its form.

The third school is concerned with taking this critique further. It is a much less coherent group than the others, but is characterised by a fear that we do not know what makes the state implement, and that it is much more open to external forces than had been supposed. Included in this school are those who say that the state has no real way of overcoming economic forces in society (Luxemburg, 1951), that there are basic contradictions in its operation which lead to its demise (Offe, 1975), that increasingly the state has no way of establishing knowledge about its own operations and its environment (Tornquist, 1980), or that it has ceased to be a valid alternative to the market mechanisms in which it tries to intervene (Brittan, 1975).

As the work of the second school has continued, it has come perilously close to providing material for the rejection of the state. Indeed, Wildavsky, one of its prime US writers, has recently moved to the right wing position within the third school (Wildavsky, 1980). However, there are still a number of questions to be asked before the case is proven.

It is here that we should concentrate our research resources: to examine the ideas that the state cannot overcome the dictates of the market in the implementation process and, therefore, always ends up as a pale reflection of it; and that one of the reasons for this is that actors in the

state never have access to the right information, and they seldom make realistic decisions regarding implementation.

Here, we are talking about the achievement of social goals in a market setting: the distribution of surplus towards those who would not otherwise receive it in a situation of increasing scarcity. The relationship between economic and social goals is basic to our understanding of the state's operation and, therefore, of its implementation processes. Only if social as well as economic goals continue to be implemented will the state retain its legitimacy and its reason for being (Dicey, 1905; Galbraith, 1970; Lenin, 1972). Therefore, the author is of the opinion that implementation of social goals, whatever the political posture of the central, regional or local state apparatus may be, is the crucial focus of research. This applies in nations which are still coping with development and growth, just as much as it does in those where international scarcity is inducing decline, or at least a considerable adjustment of changing economic circumstances. It is particularly important in societies where the political apparatus depends overtly for its legitimacy on the achievement of "socialist" goals. Being seen to distribute the economic product fairly is just as important in growing economies, as in those which are declining. *Indeed, the opportunities for so doing are greater in situations of growth, although, ironically, social goals often have less legitimacy in growth than in decline.*

It also applies whether we are concerned with research into economy, and particularly the labour market itself, or with questions of social services, or housing and infrastructure. Social and economic goals are still central to the debate about the nature of policy for all sectors of public policy (with the possible exception of the defence sector). They are even more central to the implementation process.

## 2. Planning and implementation

The planning concept is obviously central to this question. Planning is based upon an, albeit frequently limited, concept of rationality in the state's progress from policy to implementation (Bennis *et al.*, 1976; Preteceille, 1981). Planning is always an important subject of political debate at national, regional, and local levels. That debate concentrates on its legitimacy: and the latter depends upon its ability to "deliver the goods". The role of planning in the implementation process of social goals is thus central to our concern.

It is the *possibility* of planning which we are studying, and particularly the relationship between the mainstream of the implementation of policies, and those processes which are identified as "planning". We need to know whether it is peripheral, whether it is essential for the implementation of social goals, or whether it is more appropriate for economic goals.

This is what the author assumes to be, the central research question in implementation: the role of planning in the implementation of social goals in public policy and whether it can effectively avoid the penetration

of economic criteria into “the social” in such a way as to deny social outcomes.

Such a research topic cuts neatly across the three groups of theory which were mentioned above. It commences with a question arising from the radical critique of the operation of the state. It examines implementation behaviour of the state utilising concepts drawn from the other two bodies of theory. It then seeks explanation in the appropriate of the three. Similarly it will seek prescription based on the three bodies of theory, suggesting a more controlled bureaucratic response, a looser more conflictual style, or a withdrawal from the state in favour of the market, or some other alternative.

Thus, the author advocates an eclectic methodology; one which is “bottom-up” at the same time as it is “top-down”, one which examines conflict based on interests and power, as well as on information breakdown one which examines legitimacy in both the Weberian and Marxist senses (Weber, 1968; Habermas, 1980) and one which looks for symbolism as well as performance.

This eclecticism is mobilised because there is now no case for putting faith in one or other school of theory to answer this most basic question. The problem with eclecticism is that it tends to produce research results whose main finding is complexity. Now, although life is undeniably complex, there is a strong case for simplification, at least in the organisation of complexity. The following scheme to structure that complexity is now presented.

### **3. Public policies and society**

Three basic processes can be identified in the operation of society :

- the movement towards increasing efficiency or, at least, the maintenance of efficiency in the face of decay which shall be termed “restructuring”;
- the attempt to alleviate the effects of “restructuring” in such a way as to allow the restructuring process to continue;
- the attempt to change the distribution of income, status and life-chances which follows from operation of the efficiency criteria (Davies, 1980; Hill, 1981).

These three processes are the object of policy statement and activity or implementation by the state: they are also measurable by outcome. The relationship between them is the subject of our research. For instance, policy statements may be made in the economic sphere which are related to the need for restructuring, for example, the closure of productive capacity deemed to be outdated. In the implementation process, pressure may arise for action which also involves alleviating the effects of such closure through redundancy payments. However, also during implementation the distribution effect may lead to a worsening of the position of certain

sectors of the population, through long-term unemployment. This is a case of restructuring, *i.e.* an economic goal, without social goals, which gives social goals little chance of outside pressure from strata affected by the process. The role of interest groups and classes thus becomes central to the research.

However, one can visualize a situation of restructuring where policies are explicitly set in place for alleviation and for distributive reasons. The implementation process then becomes a much more interesting question of how the social goals can sustain themselves against the legitimacy of economic goals. To continue the example, one would envisage the closure of a plant being accompanied not only by redundancy payments, but the direction of industry to the location involved, plus retraining and placement (ensuring that the redundant workers were re-employed at earnings levels which were deliberately specified as being higher than previously). This sort of policy set produces direct conflict between the needs of efficiency (which may require labour shake-out) and higher overall productivity (which may have judged the location as inefficient and have specified lower wages etc.).

However, the focus of the research remains upon the implementation process and the way in which the state's apparatus will grapple with the conflict and the role which enterprises, unions and the affected population play.

Research can start with a redistributive policy as its focus, and for example, examine state activity designed to bring health care to the lowest income layers of society. Again, attention will be paid on the way in which the implementation process attempts to resist the effects of the drive for increased efficiency in the health service, which may demand larger units in fewer locations, bringing problems of access, and of standardisation in its wake. The relationship between this process and those agencies which support it, and the social goals and those agencies which bear them, and the complexities of the implementation process, which have been outlined, will be the area for research.

According to this model implementation research is concerned with the content of the "policy area"; yet it is surprising how many studies of implementation do not place the content of the policy area in its societal context (Van Horn, 1978). Implementation research is concerned with outcomes as well as processes. It will use any method which appears to aid explanation, including historical methods, class analysis, elite models, bargaining paradigms, and it will try to relate all the activity of those of societies' institutions which are relevant to the policy area concerned. Above all, it is neither a "top-down" nor a "bottom-up" method. It takes as its point of departure the activity which takes place "on the ground", *i.e.* what actually happens. It then traces the links between that activity, through the implementation process, to the policy statements which justify it. It examines the relative importances of planning as identified by actors in the process. It also looks at policy statements which should relate to the question in hand, but which appear not to influence the implemen-

tation process. *Society is itself a mixture of "top-down" and "bottom-up" activities. Social science must reflect this process in its research.*

What would be the outcome of such research? Obviously, this depends upon the starting point of the researchers, but let us amplify briefly. It may be found that social goals have been ignored in the implementation process, that insufficient resources have been devoted to them, that the actors who are responsible for their implementation have consequently been unable to resist the power of the restructuring process and its implementation. Calling for more resources may be the logical outcome, but research such as this will give insight into where such resources should come from and with whom they should be vested. It should tell whether the resources should be devoted to increasing the bargaining activity in the state, or reinforcing rational planning for social goals, or whether new implementation structures within the state are needed.

Such research should allow those at the bottom of the process, as well as those in the middle and at the top, to understand how to change and influence the implementation not only of policies at the top, but of the policies (unofficially) held by those at other levels, both within "state organisations" and outside.

#### **4. New orientations in implementation research: initial results**

To illustrate the sorts of output which one could expect from this type of research, some of the issues which seem to emerge from ongoing work will be summarized. This study is of the implementation process surrounding three issues in manpower policy, chosen to reflect the restructuring, alleviation and redistribution themes<sup>1</sup>.

Firstly, extreme complexity has been found. On the ground few key people knew about everything which was happening in quite confined policy areas. Local authority officers in particular were not aware of the work of other agencies and vice versa. The order of political visibility varied according to whether the issue was concerned with alleviation of effects (high visibility), restructuring (medium visibility), and redistribution (low visibility).

At a central level too, very few key actors knew what had happened or was happening at central or at local levels. Again, they tended to know more about the alleviation case than the restructuring and the redistribution activities. A garbage can effect seemed to be present. (Cohen, March & Olsen, 1972).

Secondly, the policy implementation link was not clear in many cases of activity at both local and central level:

— Policy statements would be made, but no action ensued. This was particularly true of the alleviation case, where high political visibility led

<sup>1</sup> Research on the "Implementation of public policy, in the context of central-local relations: the case of manpower policy", financed by the Social Science Research Council, Central-local relations panel. The researchers are Tom Davies and Charles Mason.

to many policy statements, but often not to implementation.

- Activity (implementation?) would take place without policy statements at local and national levels, particularly regarding restructuring.

- Activity (implementation?) would occur after central level policy had been withdrawn. This was true of redistributive policies.

- There appeared to be an attempt to disguise the fact that the centre had a policy in the restructuring sphere, whilst implementation was certainly occurring.

Thirdly, the content of policy certainly seemed to have an effect on implementation particularly regarding resources, *i.e.* the availability of the problem, such that :

- restructuring tended to receive “adequate” resourcing;

- alleviation tended to receive considerable resourcing, but much less than the scale of the problem warranted;

- there were few resources available for the most difficult task of all – that of redistribution.

One could perceive a legitimacy resource relationship (high legitimacy/resource – high legitimacy/low legitimacy/low resource – low legitimacy/low resource) articulated with the political visibility of the policy area concerned (Davies & Mason, 1982).

Fourthly, the virtual helplessness of the whole implementation apparatus to avoid the logic of the economic, in each policy area became obvious. Those activities which tried to introduce elements of positive discrimination or equity against the criteria of the economic were relatively helpless to avoid distortion of their out-put towards the efficiency criteria. This appeared to be “self-evident” value in the process of implementation, even where there was great commitment of social goals: so much so that it has been named the “magic of the economic” (Davies & Mason, 1981). Underlying this nomenclature is the problem of scarcity.

The predominance of the “economic” in decisions about implementation tends to lead to outcomes which make the original policy statements appear to be symbolic, and contrary to what was intended by those concerned.

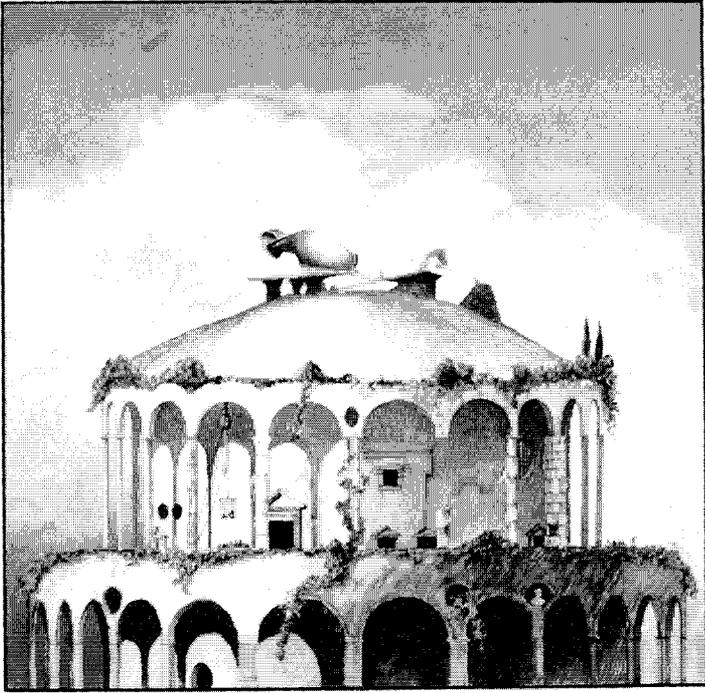
One of the benefits of the kind of methodology which has been proposed is to avoid the reification of “the state” suggesting instead that the state is an ever-changing, ever conflictual series of institutions, which are difficult to reify. It avoids the reification of “policy”. It becomes an object for study whether policy exists, what its relationship to implementation might be, and whether it is always meant to be implemented. It avoids the reification of classes, except where they are in action such as, for instance, workers taking to the streets to defend their places of work against closure. At the same time, it reintroduces the concept of a “force” in social process (Mills, 1959), the idea that there is a quality which is more than the sum of human activity, although obviously highly influenced by it, and indeed, the object upon which that authority is designed to play.

In this article the term "the economic" has been used to identify this force. There have been many attempts to understand it, of course: historical epochs are perhaps marked by the confidence with which social scientists interpret it for us (Frank, 1980). It is suggested that we are now in a period when there is a gap between our understanding and the reality: a gap which is expressed in the implementation process. Certainly this is increasingly admitted in the West, and perhaps in the East, where the concept of socialism in one country must now be under increasing challenge.

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*L'île mystérieuse.* Repères: L. Ricci: Projet d'un centre communautaire à Riesi, Caltanissetta (1963).

*The Mysterious Island.* Source: L. Ricci: Project for a community centre in Riesi, Caltanissetta (1963).