

Analysis of Policy Change in the Implementation Process

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Abstract: Policy implementation, refers to putting policy intentions into effect. This process largely depends on the interactions between the implementers and their service users, partners, and superiors. The reasons for policy change can be attributed to three aspects. Firstly, varied contextual conditions require changing policy measures adapted to different situations, and vague policy goals that permeate the policy process provide the prerequisite for policy deformation. Secondly, policy delivery agencies, who lack resources and supervision, “decode” policy goals based on practical contexts and arrange the tasks. Thirdly, street-level bureaucrats use discretion based on working attributes and personal factors. Finally, these factors from multiple layers interact and result in policy changes in the implementation process. This article illustrates the macro-level implementation environment and the meso-level implementation institutions, which compose the prerequisite conditions for policy implementation, as well as micro-level implementers, who play key roles in shaping policies. This comprehensive analytical structure is helpful to determine the effectiveness of public policies.

Keywords: Policy implementation; Goal ambiguity; Street-level bureaucrats; Discretion

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1. Introduction

Implementation means transmitting policy intentions into effect, during which the content, the goal, and the impact of policy can be changed accordingly. Anderson once said, “policy is made as it is being administered, and administered as it is being made” [1]. A policy cannot just be treated as a specific and concrete phenomenon, as it involves a web of decisions. According to Lipsky, the decisions of street-level bureaucrats, the routines they establish, and the devices they invent to cope with uncertainties and work pressures embody the public policies they carry out [2]. It is widely believed that frontline workers exercise discretion in making policy changes. Policy implementation is dependent on the interactions between the implementers and their service users, partners, and superiors.

Policy changes during the implementation process reflect the flexibility of the policy implementation, however, it can also lead to an evasion of responsibility and damage to public interests. Policy change is a matter of the effectiveness of policies and the credibility of public administrations. It is important to determine the reasons for policy changes during the implementation process. In this article, the reasons will be analyzed from three aspects, which are linked with each other. The first part addresses the policy implementation environment, including varied implementation contexts and goal ambiguity. The second part focuses on policy delivery agencies who lack resources and supervision. In the third section, which is the key part of the analysis, attention is paid to the implementers who use discretion and change the policies. This article aims to provide a comprehensive analytical framework from macro-level, meso-level, and

micro-level perspectives, thus contributing to a better understanding of government governance and the effectiveness of public policies.

2. Policy implementation environment

It is important not to understate the environment in which the policies are implemented because changing institutional environments and regional situations may constrain or change policy enforcement ^[3], meanwhile, ambiguous policy goals in the policy implementation process will create space for subordinate organizations to make adjustments.

2.1. Varied implementation contexts

The political, socio-economic, and cultural contexts can influence the process of policy enforcement. There is no such thing as a one-size-fits-all policy. Matland described the importance of contextual condition, asserting that “mutations” may occur when policies are implemented in different contexts ^[4]. Hill and Hupe also suggested that the implementation inevitably takes different shapes and forms in different cultures and institutional settings ^[5]. For example, City Deals, which is an important economic policy of United Kingdom (UK), was published by Conservative and Liberal Democrat coalition government ^[6]. In order to boost economic growth and increase employment, governments achieve agreements with cities, which are empowered to make decisions independently on how to use public funds to carry out policy goals. The first wave of City Deals started in 2012, covering eight largest cities or regions outside London, including Greater Manchester, Nottingham, and Newcastle. Due to the significant differences across regions, City Deals were made based on the characteristics and the development needs of each city.

A top-down political structure and a decentralized administration system are both features of China’s governance system ^[3]. Policy formulation is initiated at the central committee or central government, followed by the local governments, who are in charge of implementing the policy. In view of the difference in the development periods in different regions, local governments would enforce and modify policies based on the advantages, resources, and requirements. These changes in implementation contexts occur throughout policy delivery due to the existence of multiple administrative layers (provincial, municipal, county, and township) in China ^[7]. Generally, policies, especially those with great influence and wide coverage, tend to come across varied contexts in the implementation, which makes it possible for policy delivery organizations and implementers to change policies.

2.2. Goal ambiguity

Ambiguous policy goals penetrate into the whole policy process and can exert influences on the policy implementation. When the policy outcome does not reach as expected, top-down researches focus on what the real policy objectives are and whether they have been achieved or not. In fact, the policy goals are always debatable and ambiguous. As some scholars indicate that ambiguity continues to exist throughout the policy process with vague preferences for actors ^[8]. Some policies are deliberately made imprecise and opaque, and politicians have no intention of securing policy enforcement. Matland ^[4] further argues that vague goals can reduce conflicts and competition among multiple actors, which can help to win policy support. For policy implementing organizations, a single general policy goal enables many initiatives, however, the obscure policy goals may disrupt the policy process. If there are no clear guidelines and specific statements, much room is left for changing the policy in implementation, even leading to policy failure. In short, goal ambiguity can cause much uncertainties or even misunderstandings, which may lead to further change or skew in the policy implementation process.

3. Policy implementing agencies

How policy implementing agency's function and are financed will largely influence the policy implementation. Sufficient funds, talents, time, and well-established regulations provide solid foundations for policy enforcement; conversely, scarce resources and lax supervision of policy delivery agencies may lead to inaction and omission of policy segments. Policies are partially carried out with changes in the policy.

3.1. Resource scarcity

The lack of resources, including time, funds, and labor will constrain the policy implementation ^[9]. Policy delivery organizations need to deal with the relationship between resource arrangement and numerous programmers ^[10]. In the UK, many policy implementing agencies are cutting down officials in recent years. For example, the Chief Officer of the Durham Police Station reported that their station faced the fifth largest reduction of British police enforcement due to financial pressure ^[11]. Under this circumstance, policies have been partially implemented or even modified due to fiscal and labor shortages.

3.2. Lack of supervision

The lack of supervision may bring about inaction or non-programmed implementation. It is a challenge to carry out the supervision of policy enforcement in view of varied working environments, clients, and workloads in the process of policy implementation. Policy outputs are difficult to identify and quantify. For example, the policy of developing education and raising educational standards needs to be carried out; however, the cause of education cannot be achieved in a short term, and teachers cannot be evaluated by the number of talents they cultivate. It takes several years to see the results of an educational work. The complexity and uniqueness of public service jobs make it harder to measure the performance of policy implementation. The difficulty of supervision within policy delivery agencies causes a higher chance of deviation of policy implementation from programmed formats.

4. Policy implementers

Policy implementers are called "street-level bureaucrats" by Lipsky, referring to public service workers, who have direct and daily interactions with the citizens, as well as possess considerable discretion in their jobs ^[2]. According to Lipsky, these real "policy-makers" may change the policies following two stages: firstly, they grant different degrees of discretion in making decisions during the interactions with citizens based on the complexity and unpredictability of working situations; secondly, through negotiations, individual behaviors can be transformed collectively into agency action, thus engendering policy change. Generally, at the policy implementer level, the deviance of implementation can be unintended or deliberate, and the use of discretion can be attributed to the working attributes and personal factors of policy implementers.

4.1. Working attributes

Frontline workers are both the "providers of public benefits" and "keepers of public order" ^[2]. However, the increasing public demand and inadequate resources put street-level bureaucrats in a dilemma between promoting fair and effective welfare services and controlling public expenditures. Due to the large amount of work, street-level bureaucrats should come up with strategies to play their dual roles. Therefore, to reduce the gap between realistic limitation and ideal work goals, the conception of their jobs is redefined, and a new understanding of policy is developed by street-level bureaucrats themselves in the execution of their work.

Apart from working without sufficient resources, their jobs also require sensitive observation and

judgment ^[2]. Different from their managers who emphasize on performance and are result-oriented, street-level bureaucrats need to take the implementation process seriously. Sometimes, they may need to adapt humanitarian strategies in response to specific situations, which may not be expected in policy formulation or included in written policy instructions. For example, stricter law enforcement and normalized sentencing can contribute to social equality and harmony. However, ethical norms and moral principles are also of great importance when enforcing policies. For special cases like juvenile delinquency, police officers and judges may need to make cautious judgements based on practical situations as equivalent punishments may bring traumatic harm to both, adolescents and their families. Therefore, to provide more humanized public services rather than computerized ones, the discretion of street-level bureaucrats should be exercised, which allows them freedom of choice of action ^[10].

4.2. Personal factors

The implementers' comprehension of the policy, reaction to the assignments, and the extent of reaction are important factors that link policies and actions. Their attitude towards their work and whether they are good at it or willing to devote their time and energy or not will influence the completion and implementation of policies. Lipsky thinks that street-level bureaucrats prefer to keep the risks and unpleasantness of work to a minimum, in order to maximize profits and work satisfaction. It is reasonable because frontline workers also expect their own requirements to be satisfied rather than to invest in time and energy endlessly. The nature of this work does not enable them to approach the ideal working concept. Additionally, serving as the agents of state institutions and representatives of public interest, street-level bureaucrats have dual roles and possess dual attitudes toward their jobs. Although there are clear policy statements, they can refuse to follow and change the policy through their deeds. Furthermore, ineffective communication can cause deviation ^[12]. Poor communication of some policy implementers may lead to misunderstandings of policies and a total change of policy during the implementation.

These personal behaviors of policy implementers may affect the capacity of the agency to implement policies. Policy practitioners have their own preferences and standards, which may be different from high-level officials, and they cannot be considered to be working toward the institutional goals. Although there are strict instructions from high-level officials, policemen still can decide not to pace the potentially dangerous streets, and teachers have freedom to choose what to teach and give which student special attention. According to the theory of bureaucracy by Max Weber, an organization is based on hierarchy, which the staff within the hierarchy have specified rights, obligations, and duties, and they obey the authority without reservation. However, a modicum of non-compliance within organizations is still tolerable because both, managers and workers clearly know the expense of official recruitment and training. These workers can display their disagreement with high-level managers through negative behaviors, such as absenteeism, tardiness, and pessimism ^[2]. Consequently, when these individuals act collectively within the organization by negotiation, the capability of the whole organization to reach policy goals will be weakened. Under this circumstance, workers who lack motivation or willingness implement policies at only minimal levels rather than working to full capacity. These individual forces are gathered and enlarged at the agency level, which will then affect the possibility of achieving policy goals.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, policy change, occurring in the implementation stage, is influenced by the policy implementation environment, implementing agency, and the implementer. At the macro level, varied contextual conditions require changing policy measures adapted to different situations, and vague policy goals that permeate the policy process are the prerequisite for policy deformation. Additionally, policy delivery agencies may decode policy goals based on practical contexts and arrange the tasks. Working with

limited resources and lax supervision, policy implementers develop a single coping mechanism to satisfy the diversified needs of clients. Discretion is exercised by frontline workers, and service standards are applied flexibly in response to the clients and superiors. Apart from working attributes, personal factors, such as individual preferences, working capacity, and the understanding of policies, can also influence policy implementation. Implementers can act collectively and further shape the implementation approach of implementing agencies. In conclusion, these factors from multiple layers interact and result in policy changes in the implementation process. During the implementation process, policy change cannot be considered as a right or wrong action. This comprehensive analytical structure is helpful to determine the effectiveness of public policies.

Disclosure statement

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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