POWER, POLITICS, AND THE POLICY PROCESS

Essay question:

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According to Weible and Sabatier (2018, p.302), the "policy process is complex," and several researchers have presented alternative frameworks and theories to comprehend it. Initially, the focus in this field was primarily on policy formation, i.e., how policies are framed and agendas are set, with the assumption that implementation is just the final step of the policy, and that if the policy is drafted well, the delivery will be successful (Smith,1973, p. 197-198).

One notion that is utilised to understand policy formulation is bounded rationality. Herbert A. Simon proposed the concept of bounded rationality. It proposes that individuals are confined by time, knowledge, and cognitive ability, and these constraints compel them to make suboptimal decisions in any situation (Simon, 1990). Similarly, policymakers are confined by time, money, and knowledge when developing policies, resulting in programmes that are only good enough. These limitations are frequently the source of failure or lag in policy implementation on the ground.

This essay primarily talks about policy implementation. When we look at the history of policy implementation theories, we can see that they aren't all that old. Pressman and Wildavsky published the first policy implementation literature in 1973. The idea explains where to look for when analysing the implementation of any policy, which led to the development of the top-down method (start where the policy is designed). In the 1980s, the literature shifted to a more analytical and comparative approach (Goggin, 1986). They looked for particular variables and conceptual frameworks to explain variation in implementation performance among programmes and government entities (Van Meter and Van Horn, 1976; Sabatier and Mazmanian, I979, Ig80). Growing criticism of the top-down strategy towards the end of the 1970s led to an alternative approach for analysing implementation (Sabatier, 1986). Most well-known policy steps of formulation, execution, and reformulation vanished in this new paradigm. The street-level bureaucrat was now the starting point, as it was considered that local bureaucrats often disembark from the aims set by the centre and influenced them (ibid). The synthesis of prior theories is now the most often used theory.

This essay attempts to analyse one current public policy using a theoretical grasp of implementation and policy failure concepts. Of course, it's vital to remember that we're not suggesting that implementation is a separate step in the policymaking process as you read the following piece. As previously said, there are a variety of concepts, frameworks, and theories that we may use to better understand how implementation works or how to analyse public policy today. However, learning one theory in isolation and then applying it in a real-world setting does not show the underlying reality. As with many theories, many theories had to be studied and applied to comprehend any policy failure or implementation gap. The following essay examines one of India's major policies and explains why it is failing.

BACKGROUND

India focuses on high economic growth and assumes that this growth will trickle down. However, this economic policy over the years has put 30% of the population below the poverty line (Agrawal, 2019). In 2005, to address this poverty and rural unemployment, government introduced employment scheme under the name of National Rural Employment Guarantee act and in 2009, it was renamed as Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MNERGA). In the constitutional language the act is written as 'An Act to provide for the enhancement of livelihood security of the households in rural areas of the country by providing at least one hundred days of guaranteed wage employment in every financial year to every household whose adult members volunteer to do Skilled manual work and for matters connected therewith or incidental thereto' (nrega.nic.in, n.d.).

The most basic intent of the act is to give employment to people in rural areas. On demand, the statute provides poor person 100 days of pay employment. Other objectives of the policy include women's empowerment, improved livelihood, reduced discrimination, creation of sustainable assets, and reduction of rural-urban migration. Later in the essay, we will come back to this point and explain how these over ambitious and over optimistic objectives is one of the causes of its failure.

IN DETAIL

To be in a position to analyse the policy, we first need to understand basic provisions of the act. Using both PRS website and government website on MNERGA the provisions of the act are summed up below:

1. Legal Right to Work: Every rural household can apply for the scheme and get a job card under the act. The registered job card holders can seek employment of 100 days within 15 days of applying.

2. Unemployment allowance and delay allowance: If the employment is not provided within 15 days, the person is entitled to receive unemployment allowance as per the act. Also, any delay in payment is assured with extra payment.

3. Wages are paid at the State Minimum Wage rate, as determined by the Minimum Wages Act of 1948. For all unskilled employment, the current wage rate is Rs.117/-, while for skilled labour, it is Rs.120/-.

4. Women empowerment: One-third of the total beneficiary to be women.

5. Duties of Gram Panchayat (local body): The Panchayat is responsible for preparing a list of projects in consultation with Gram Sabha (village members above 18 years) that needs to be taken up under the scheme. The work can be anything like building a road, constructing a dam, reservoir, irrigation facility etc [the act (nrega.nic.in, n.d.) mentions a list of projects that can be undertaken in a priority basis]

6. Finances: The central government and the states split the funding. Wages (for unskilled, semi-skilled, and skilled labour), material, and administrative costs are the three key elements of spending, The central government bears 100% of the cost of unskilled labour, 75% of the cost of semi-skilled and skilled labour, 75% of the cost of supplies, and 6% of the administrative costs. (Jotiya, 2013)

7. Social audit: The Gram Sabha is given the responsibility to conduct social audit within the Gram Panchayat

8. Grievance redressal: The state is responsible to set up grievance redressal mechanism.

THE SUCCESS PART OF POLICY

It has been iterated by many policy scholars that no policy can be a complete failure. McConnell has noted, "failure" resides at the extreme end of a success–failure spectrum, where it is characterized by absolute nonachievement. Such a situation will be unusual (Hudson, Hunter, and Peckham, 2019). It is true for MNREGA as well. The policy is on ground for more than a decade and government has been spending a fixed amount of budget over the years that has led to some improvement in unemployment and woman's status situation in rural India.

There exists a literature on how to define success and one school among many sees success as both fact and interpretation (realism): where the policy stands successful on some respects but interpretations differ in terms of whether it is successful or a failure (McConnell, 2010, p.31). Following points looks at some case study where this policy has been successful on some counts:

a.   The Tamil Nadu case study discusses the state's accomplishments. Prasanna, Natarajamurthy, and Malar (2014) examine data for the Tamil Nadu state and discover that financial inclusion has occurred in the research area. The study also reveals that, following the implementation of MGNREGA, migration has decreased and agricultural earnings have increased, and women have been empowered by wage rate bargaining power.

b.   Low income, poor material conditions, social backwardness, low levels of literacy, and the lack of a stable source of income have all been proven to be significant in deciding MGNREGA participation in Assam, according to Baruah and Radkar (2017). Furthermore, those over the traditional working age of 65, as well as women who are not normally part of the formal labour, play an important role. As a result, it is discovered that MGNREGA is reaching out to most of its intended beneficiaries, namely those who are vulnerable to high levels of livelihood insecurity.

Success stories vary by location, and no single region has yet met all of MNERGA's goals. MGNREGA appears to be successful in its targeting, according to research. MGNREGA can engage with the most disadvantaged and disenfranchised, according to several research, because of its self-selecting demand driven design.

However, according to the study (Agarwal, 2019), the act failed to accomplish women's empowerment since, in most cases, females were not included in the job planning, and there is a weak link between lowering migration and MNREGA (although further research is required in this area).

TOP-DOWN APPROACH

There is an immense literature that talks about the failure of MNREGA; some suggest that there is a fault in design, for instance, Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act: Design Failure, Implementation Failure or Both? By Agarwal 2019, while others suggest that there is an implementation gap and some other talk on whether the act should be withdrawn altogether.

MNREGA is a centrally structured policy for which the centre provides the resources to the states. It is sensible to use a top-down strategy with this structure (first explained by Daniel Mazmanian). This strategy is based on the stage of the policy cycle. It focuses on the legal framework. The top-down strategy appears to be more appropriate in this case because I there is a dominating piece of legislation organising the situation, (ii) we are primarily concerned in mean responses, and the situation is at least reasonably well structured. The bottom-up strategy, on the other hand, is utilised when I there is no dominant piece of legislation but instead a vast number of actors with no power dependency, or (2) one is primarily interested in the dynamics of many local circumstances (Sabatier, 1986).

For efficient and successful implementation, a structure should have the following variables (ibid). However, MNREGA lags in each of these variables:

➢   **A structure that has clear objective**- Many experts, including Exworthy and Powell (2004), have emphasised the importance of having a defined purpose. MNERGA, on the other hand, is frequently chastised for having overly ambitious goals. In summary, the MGNREGA programme combined 'wage payment for desired labour production' with social goals such as poverty alleviation, distress migration, democracy strengthening, participatory planning, and empowerment through social audit. Strengthening Panchayati Raj Institutions was added to this toxic mix of frequently opposing goals, resulting in a dilution of programme planning and management (Agarwal, 2019). Apart from being overly ambitious, it also lacks clarity; the policy's goals are contradictory: on the one hand, it strives to build a demand-driven sustainable asset, while on the other, it pushes to define 'work output with administrative cost limiting' (6 percent) (Agarwal,2019). Over optimism is cited by Hudson, Hunter, and Peckham (2019) as one reason for policy failure. The policy has enumerated many objectives because of a faulty assessment of Panchayats' ability to run democratically as Indian society has barely outgrown the social and

class order, an overconfidence in the hierarchical order in implementing agencies, and a lack of evidence on what kind of work needs to be done and when.

➢ **A strong compliance from the target groups and the implementing agencies**– This variable is also defaulted by the policy. There are several areas where compliance is not adhered to, resulting in a significant implementation gap and negatively affecting the policy's success.

  o The legislation mandates that each state produce a Scheduled of Rates (SOR) based on the projected work, with these SORs varying according to geographic location (Government of India, 2015). However, for manual labour, the majority of the state has only one SOR, which does not account for regional differences.

  o The act envisages to have grievance redressal system in place. There is no redressal mechanism available for people who need jobs but are not included in the programme (Dreze, 2011; Dutta, Murgai, Ravallion and Dominique, 2012; MGNREGA Sameeksha II (2015). Majority of the state haven't even farmed grievance redressal rules and only 5 states have set up district level ombudsman. Thus, leaving a scope for corruption to continue.

The 'dispersed governance' aspect of policy failure identified by Hudson, Hunter, and Peckham, 2019 can also explain the implementation gap. Whether governance is decentralised or centralised, implementation will be heavily influenced by the local context (bottom-up method), and so MNREGA's success in some states and failure in others can be attributed to a lack of understanding of the various local situations.

➢ **Committed and skilful implementing officials-** The entire programme is based on the Gram Panchayat and Gram Sabha's capacity (village local bodies). The Gram Panchayat is given responsibilities such as identifying work, issuing job cards, checking registration, keeping records, preparing an implementation report, and so on (the Ministry of rural development, 2014). The Gram Sabha is in charge of conducting social audits and overseeing task completion. In general, literacy in villages is low, thus they require additional help to complete jobs like as those given under MNREGA. However, paucity of administrative and technical support at the Gram Panchayat (GP) and Block levels, particularly at the Program officer, Technical Assistant, and Employment Guarantee Assistant levels, is highlighted multiple times in the Comptroller and Auditor General (CAG) report (Narayan, n.d.). According to the conclusions of the study, there is a paucity of devoted employees, poor training facilities, and a lack of community involvement (kumar et al., 2010). Even if the local entities are dedicated and demonstrate will in this situation, the program's failure is because of its incapacity to be implemented.

➢ **A political support from the interest groups, legislative and executive sovereign throughout the program**- (Downs, 1967; Murphy, 1973)- The political support in this programme can be enlisted through factors like budget allocation, the timely payment of wages, and other allowance of the works and 100 days of employment provided within 15 days. However, multiple news articles, studies, and other sources have revealed that MNERGA can only give 50 days of employment on average, with no allowances paid and incomes far below the subsistence level (Nandy, 2018; Agarwal 2019)

➢ **Social and economic changes that don't hamper political support and causal theory** –The programme should be constructed in such a way that it is unaffected by socioeconomic conditions (Hofferbert, 1974; Aaron, 1978). The Covid situation not only led the government to cut back on budget allocation to the program but also there was a decline in the average days of employment provided and in the number of Gram panchayat taking part in conducting MNREGA activities (Sharma, 2021).

The implementation and policy failure are both examined using a top-down approach. Paul A. Sabatier (1986) created these variables by taking inspiration from several researchers' work on policy implementation.

Looking at different scholars like Exworthy and Powell (2004) argue that successful implementation is more likely when the three policy streams (policy, process, and resource) are aligned across the three dimensions of the (traditional) vertical (central-local) dimension, as well as the horizontal dimensions of both central-central (joined-up government at the centre) and local-local (local government at the periphery) (joined-up governance at the periphery).

1. In the vertical relationship, the policy stream has a clear objective, the process stream is about policy ownership—the stakeholders must believe it is "their" problem and they must have a role to play in the partnership, with solutions under their control, and the resource stream deals with financial distribution. Lack of cooperation at all levels can be seen in MNREGA- the central local cooperation is vilified by nuclear objective and deficient funding.

2. The horizontal dimensions place a premium on departmental cooperation, and any wicked challenge entails many departments tackling the problem, and it's common to notice that ownership is lost as a result of the presence of multiple departments. Subordinate agencies are 'controlled' by each department's performance management and indicators. Local agencies, on the other hand, receive contradictory messages because of these disparate systems. But it further complicates an already difficult procedure.

   a. The Ministry of Rural Development is the primary stakeholder, with the department of Agriculture and Farmers' Welfare, Forest and Environment, Water Resources, Rural Development, Land Resources, and the Ministry of Drinking Water and Sanitation expected to collaborate (the Ministry of rural development, 2014). According to one of the study's findings, line departments are uninterested in MNREGA's work (Pankaj, 2012). The convergence is varied among states and communities, according to a report published by Dr. Kunal Sen (2018).

3. The final dimension discusses local-to-local collaboration. With weak collaboration at the centre, the local-to-local collaboration weakens and is also weak because local bodies find it difficult to agree on a "shared vision" since they have diverse organisational cultures, policy styles, financial structures, and mechanisms of responsibility. (Hood 1976; Hogwood 1987) and different capacities.

As previously said in the essay, synthesis of the many theories can aid us in better understanding the policy implementation gap, as the top-down method is not without criticism. This approach falls short of elucidating the techniques used by street level actors in the public and private sectors at various levels of government to deal with the inconsistencies in the goals, as well as how these street level actors interpret the goals. A synthesis using the bottom-uppers' unit of analysis can be used to avoid this. It then takes this starting point and mixes it with top-down considerations about how socioeconomic factors and legal tools constrain behaviour. This was not possible in the following programme because of a lack of research on the local context and variations in the local setting. More research on the local context over time can enrich our understanding of the implementation gaps, allowing us to learn lessons.

It is quite improbable that the entire policy would be scrapped because the programme is a source of votes for political leaders and is not a complete disaster. Clearly, the strategy causes considerable reorganisation, such as increased administrative costs, increased budget allocation, capacity building, and more local research to propose local solutions.

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