

Thinking about Implementation: An orientation note ¹

1. Implementation is about what is happening in a 'box' between initiation of an intervention and (expected) outcomes. It is usually what makes an intervention work or not, in addition to or despite the quality of policy design.



2. The implementation box is made up of actors: civil servants, 'beneficiaries' of funding, end-users, intermediaries, other organisations, etc. They all have a certain level of discretionary power and the outcome of an intervention can be considered as 'what actors do with an intervention'. What they do is not necessarily what the administration wants.
3. Policy initiators need to take into account the degree of 'actor discretion', when designing policies and especially when considering implementation arrangements.
 - Where actor discretion is low, as would be the case for the recipients of benefits, an administration initiating a policy is mainly concerned with coverage, i.e. reaching policy targets and beneficiaries. Policy initiators are likely to pre-specify delivery arrangements which may include modes of enforcement to maximise take-up. This can be labelled a '**Delivery**' model of implementation
 - Intermediary levels of actor discretion could be when a grant is on offer but potential recipients may choose not to apply for the grant or not always use grants for intended purposes. Here, Administrations will set out to involve, incentivise and make beneficiary groups into stakeholders who as far as possible take on board and share policy aims and targets. This can be labelled a '**Reaction**' model of implementation.
 - When actor discretion is high policy initiators may have few ways of influencing actors to follow policy directions, indeed such actors may be indifferent. This may be the case with some SME policies and many Research and Technology Development policies. Here Administrations will need to strongly support policy uptake both positively through targeted incentives and avoiding negative consequences. This can be labelled the '**Autonomy**' model of implementation.
4. All three models cohabit, sometimes within the same intervention, those considering implementation and its evaluation need to consider which model best fits the policy they are dealing with.

¹ A note prepared for the Evaluation Helpdesk by Thomas Delahais

5. A key stance of implementation evaluation is that interventions work or do not work in context, notwithstanding whether they are 'intrinsically' good or bad. Context includes actors & their relationships, other interventions, territorial setting, natural environment, etc.
6. Implementation evaluation typically opens the box to understand the processes, relationships, conditions, interdependencies, etc. which explain why interventions work or not in a particular context. It does not only look at pathways to success, but also at pathways of inertia or even backlash.
7. As such it is useful to improve policy making, and in particular to better include implementation in policy making (rather than considering it an afterthought). This can be done retrospectively, but for new/innovative interventions, when the attitude of stakeholders is pretty much unknown, real-time feedback is generally needed (e.g. through "implementation experiments").

Key questions to ask about implementation:

- Who are the actors involved in implementation? Are they confined to the Administration or policy initiators?
- If there is a wider set of actors beyond the administration, to what extent can their attitude and decisions lead to the success or failure of the intervention?
- To what extent do they need to agree or support the policy objective for the expected outcomes to happen?
- To what extent can other elements of contexts affect whether a policy initiative or intervention works or not?
- Can you reconstitute the chain of decisions of the actors that would potentially lead to positive results? Could you do the same for a lack of results? For negative results?
- What methods or tools would you need to clarify these chains? To understand why it works for some and not for others?