Evaluating Public Programs Implementation: An Exploratory Case Study

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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the importance of evaluating the implementation of public programs as an integral component of organizational actions performed by public administrations. Drawing on contributions from policy studies and organization theory, the authors assign a dual role to evaluation: valuable cognitive resource and accountability tool for the policymakers. This exploratory case study contributes to the literature on implementation evaluation by providing an encompassing theory-grounded perspective on a recent e-government project by the City of Milan. The authors’ preliminary findings confirm the heuristic potential of an evaluation approach where interdisciplinary inputs can enlighten not only the results, but also the process of design, adoption and the use of e-services.

INTRODUCTION

In this paper, evaluation is defined as an opinion on the capacity of the policy (i.e., the set of actions designed to address a collective problem) to transform the state of the situation-problem in the desired direction (Dente & Vecchi, 1999). The public usually pays little attention to the policy implementation process and tends to take it for granted because the main focus of the collective interest is on the decision-making process. Implementation is seen as a “technical” phase and as such is erroneously considered neutral and devoid of discretionary power. Contrary to this widespread opinion, implementation is an uncertain phase in which discretionary power cannot be eliminated through ex-ante standardization. This happens...
for various reasons. First, the operational launch of a program verifies if what has been decided moves closer to (or further away from) the goal. Second, the implementation process itself can be dogged by unexpected events – such as cuts in available resources, revised priorities - placing the original project at risk. Ultimately, implementation is characterized by ambiguity because it involves the mobilization of a significant number of resources and actors whose personal agendas do not necessarily coincide with the goals of the other stakeholders.

Figure 1 displays the various areas where and when evaluation can take place. Evaluation can focus on (Lippi, 2007): a) the “products” generated by the policy (outputs) or the effects on the recipients (the outcomes and impacts); b) the implementation, that is the actions and decisions culminating in the launch of a policy, such as the provision of a service, the enactment of a law, and so forth; or c) the phases in which the political agenda takes shape (issue-making and decision-making). Depending on when it is carried out, an evaluation can be ex post, when it analyzes the results (outputs, outcomes and impacts); in itinere, when it is ongoing and conducted during implementation; or, ultimately, ex ante, when it is carried out before the implementation phase. Typically, ex ante and the ex post evaluations aim to confirm or revoke decisions already made. The in itinere evaluation – which generally responds to a broader cognitive need – seeks to account for what happens as the implementation of the policy unfolds.

This paper sets out to analyze the dynamics that precede the production of the outputs, outcomes, and impacts. It does not focus on the evaluation of the effectiveness of the programs or the results of public policies, but proposes to produce knowledge that will shed a different light on the problems of implementation. Implementing e-government initiatives is not business as usual, and there is evidence that all local governments may not be up to the challenge (Streib & Navarro, 2008). We maintain that the obstacles faced when evaluating implementation (implementation is considered the “black box” of policymaking) lie in the conceptual realm and need to be addressed starting there. We seek to demonstrate how organizational knowledge can help us cast new light on the evaluation conundrum. These preliminary reflections aim to offer a scientifically founded opinion on the implementation of a recent e-government project – called Ecopass - by the City of Milan (Italy). Ecopass falls within the scope of a major public policy promoted by the municipal administration aimed at reducing environmental pollution in the historic city centre and which, since it came into force (January 2008), has triggered bitter clashes between the various interested parties and even between the majority of the municipal council supporters themselves. Thus forming the context of uncertainty and ambiguity in which the key question posed is: How and on which assumptions have the public administrators tackled the problem of evaluating the implementation of this new policy?

Our discussion will refer mainly to the concepts inspired by Policy Studies and Organization Theory. Due to space limitations, we will not examine the technical content of the

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**Figure 1. Policymaking and Evaluation Types (adapted from: Lippi, 2007, p. 77)**
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