

Why Is There Often a Gulf between What Policy-Makers Intend and What Is Implemented?

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Abstract—There is often an implementation gap between policy-makers' intention and the outcome of policies. If a good policy is not implemented strictly and effectively, it will greatly reduce the effectiveness of the policy. This paper will discuss this phenomenon and analyze the causes and solutions with two typical cases. Through this case study, it can be found that, on the premise that the system and the policy itself are legal and reasonable; the design of the policy system should be adapted to the actual needs and continuously improved during the implementation process. Furthermore, the improvement of government capacity and appropriate stimulation of local officials can also guarantee the effective implementation of policies.

Keywords—*implementation gap; policy-making; intention; bureaucracy; local government*

I. INTRODUCTION

There are usually two stages for a good public policy to achieve its goal. On the one hand, policies should be formulated on the basis of appropriate research and be set through due process with good intentions. On the other hand, more complicated and challenging, the realization of policy objectives depends largely on the effect of the policy implementation. In general, policy-makers suppose that policies would be implemented strictly and efficiently by executive departments and public services could be delivered smoothly by civil servants. Nevertheless, in fact, policy formulation and implementation are often not unified. This phenomenon could be called implementation gap. This essay would firstly interpret the basic definition of implementation gap. The second part of this essay would discuss the general reasons for the existence of the implementation gap. And then it will be followed by two relevant examples to explain implementation gap concretely in actual situation. After that, it will provide some basic advice to address this issue.

Implementation gap usually refers to the differences between the intentions of policies and the actual effect of implementation. This gap could affect a variety of areas from public service delivery to the economic operation. Generally, governments, private sectors and citizens are the principal stakeholders. Many researches pay more attention on local governments, because they have the responsibility to implement the policies issued by the central government, and they could also establish local regulations and implement them by themselves. Meanwhile, this problem is more likely to be

discovered and reforms are relatively easier to be advanced in small-scale government. In addition, the reasons for the existence of implementation gaps at the national level are often deep-seated and difficult to change. In the personal and micro-level perspective, citizens and local enterprises would be more realistically aware of the possible impact of the implementation gap, because whether the policy is implemented could directly affect people's livelihoods.

The importance of policy implementation is intuitive and obvious. If the government is well aware of what needs to be done, but the executive agencies lack the will or capacity to act, the intentions of government's policies will be barely achievable. Moreover, if the policy is not properly implemented, there is no real impact on the lives of those who should benefit from a particular policy. The gap between the motivation of the government's policy-making and how to translate this intention into reality determines the impact of policies [2]. In general, poor policy implementation is often associated with several key aspects, such as government transparency, accountability, and citizen supervision. Meanwhile, implementation gaps exist not only in the administrative branches, but also in the legislative and regulatory areas. As a result, some scholars emphasize the importance of constantly improving the system design and the quality of the regulatory framework to reduce the actual implementation gap. In fact, many countries still suffer from implementation gaps, even though they have a legitimate administrative framework to achieve government functions.

II. SOURCES OF IMPLEMENTATION GAP

In order to effectively dispose the issues arising from implementation gaps, it is important to understand what factors contribute to those gaps. While the implementation gap is universally prevalent in the world, the reasons for this are different because of the differences between the policies envisaged in the design process and the prevailing realities in practice. The causes for implementation gap are often the result of the interaction of many potential elements in political, economic, social and cultural fields.

The lack of appropriate implementation is fundamentally linked to the nature and complexity of national governance structures and public administration systems. Nowadays, bureaucracies are over-inflated in many countries at both the local and national levels, with horizontally and vertically

overlapping or ambiguous privileges. If the responsibility and accountability of government agencies are not clearly defined, the civil servants would have excessive discretion to enforce the policy in the way they wish or do not implement it at all. That is particularly the case at the subordinate level in the centralized administrative systems, since the rules and policies laid down by the central authorities seem unclear, unfair or unrealistic to the street-level bureaucrats responsible for implementing these regulations [8]. The capacity and nature of local governance is particularly important in relation to the implementation gap at the local level, when decentralization has become an increasingly popular tendency in the world. Nevertheless, in many cases, the central government is unwilling to give real authority to local governments. On the contrary, they merely perfunctory while maintaining more or less completed control, especially when it comes to financial sector. Without sufficient financial resources and genuine administrative authority, the local governments can't effectively implement policies.

The formulation and implementation of the policy must be legitimate. When policies are formulated and implemented transparently and responsibly while allowing stakeholders to participate actively in policy-making, the resulting policies will be able to adequately address the needs and concerns of citizens. On the contrary, if decisions are made without the broader public consultation, it is likely that the policy will benefit only a small number of interest groups. As a result, most people will think those policies are illegitimate and should not be followed. The fact is that even in countries considered to have fairly well-established democratic institutions; policies may be formulated and implemented in a manner that does not meet the criteria for transparent and accountable decision-making.

The quality of the policy itself also affects the effectiveness of implementation. Even a well-intentioned policy may be affected by the implementation gap because its stipulations are too complex, unclear or contradictory. If policy-makers are unfamiliar with relative issues and they lack knowledgeable staff to help them understand the meaning of policy issues or to identify problematic provisions, the quality of policies will be compromised. In addition, the design and implementation of policies may be influenced by special interest groups who may exert pressure on intentional loopholes or ambiguous wordings in order to ensure a relaxed policy environment or to circumvent policies that are detrimental to them. In general, at the local level, the influential groups implementing policies may have priorities and interests different from decision-makers' consideration. When the local political forces do not have the motivation to implement a policy, the policy will probably stay on paper. Alternatively, those policies could be implemented in a selective and biased manner, benefiting some, but not others, and aggravating corruption in the process.

The implementation gap in some developing countries is usually blamed on the overall scarcity of resources. The cost of enforcing some policies is generally too high to afford. In reality, on the contrary, many countries with abundant natural resources are also plagued by poor governance, and the implementation gap could be even aggravated. Because their economies are over-reliant on a single sector, leading to rent-

seeking and corruption at all levels of governments. Inefficient and unfair allocation of resources can also cause implementation gap. The benefits that policies bring to ordinary citizens are often exploited by government officials, elites and interest groups. When interest groups either directly transfer resources or indirectly influence policy decisions, coupled with a lack of regulatory oversight or adequate deterrence, implementation gap may occur.

III. CASE STUDY 1: THE IMPLEMENTATION GAP OF CHINA'S URBAN PENSION SCHEME FOR RURAL-URBAN MIGRANT WORKERS

In recent years, China has directed comprehensive reforms of the basic urban pension policy for the sake of benefiting all urban workers and rural-urban migrant workers. The Social Security Law, introduced in 2011, was the first comprehensive law in China to try to compensate for social inequality. All workers employed in urban regions are eligible to apply for the urban pension scheme, which provides pension benefits according to urban living expenses. Nevertheless, the loopholes in the implementation and design of the policy have led to only a small number of migrant workers participating in the basic urban pension scheme. As of the end of 2013, the coverage rate of migrant workers in the urban pension scheme is still lower than 20% [9].

According to the theory of implementation [3], the success of policy implementation requires both the identification of policy beneficiaries and their linkage to policy, as well as the willingness of policy recipients to take the initiative. If the intended recipient lacks the will to cooperate, its execution may fail even if the policy identifies the intended recipients. Some studies show that whether they have land expropriation experience and whether migrant workers choose to settle in cities have a significant impact on their willingness to participate in the urban pension insurance system [12]. Migrant workers who have lost their land which could provide them with direct economic income and maintain basic living standards now need to find alternatives to compensate for such losses. Hence, it is easy to identify that migrant workers with experience in land expropriation are more likely to join the urban pension scheme to ensure their basic living standards in the city. Furthermore, migrant workers who plan to settle in the cities consider themselves to be non-traditional farmers who are now living in a similar way to those in the city and no longer cultivate. Therefore, they argue that the urban pension social welfare programs are in line with the economic and living standards of their new urban lifestyles, which they see as part of their transition to a new identity. Clearly, by focusing on the identification of the migrant workers whose land has been expropriated and who plan to settle in the city, the implementation of the urban pension policy could be improved.

What's more, there are some obstacles to the participation of migrant workers in urban pension schemes such as lack of information, household registration, financial situation, life expectancy and instability. The lack of information hinders the willingness of migrant workers to participate in urban pension schemes and makes them feel that they could not join the program. Many people do not know whether they are eligible to apply for urban pensions and how to take action to join the

urban pension program. For instance, some migrant workers think that they can't join the pension scheme because of rural household registration, but they do not know that urban household registration is not the only eligibility criteria. In addition, from the perspective of local government, local officials may not be reluctant to introduce the policy on the transfer of migrant workers' pensions, because they are afraid of losing their local fund-raising funds.

To sum up, in order to benefit urban migrant workers as much as possible, the Chinese government might need to make greater efforts to promote the urban pension scheme to the target recipients, particularly those affected by land expropriation and those who plan to settle permanently in the city. The implementation of the policies requires a comprehensive consideration of the unique social, cultural and political context, and the dramatic changes occurring in recent decades in China.

IV. CASE STUDY 2: THE IMPLEMENTATION GAP AND THE LIMITS OF THE TARGET INCENTIVE SYSTEM

The dual pressures of climate change and energy shortages have become more pronounced in China's rapid urbanization process. China's 35 largest cities contributed 40% of China's energy consumption and carbon emissions [11]. In the face of tremendous pressure from domestic development and the international community, the Chinese government has enacted various low-carbon policies in a short period of time to control the city's energy consumption and rapid growth of carbon emissions [6]. However, the records of the past indicate that central government policies are often poorly implemented or distorted by subordinate bureaucrats. Although the central government has provided policy incentives to local officials to implement low-carbon policies through the establishment of the Energy Conservation Target Responsibility System (ECTRS), the institutional mechanisms are still subject to a number of problems, and implementation gaps are narrowing but still exist.

Although China is a unitary, centralized and constitutional nation, its local governments have gained considerable autonomy in virtual federalism since the reform in 1978 [13]. As a result, the implementation of China's policies has become more complex and controversial, and there is usually a gap between the policy on paper and its actual implementation. It is common for local governments to challenge the central government's directives and regulations for local interests. For instance, the large-scale energy demand and consumption of many energy-intensive cities make energy saving and emission reduction an urgent and challenging problems for local governments. For the sake of short-term economic development, local officials are often not interested in such policies like low-carbon city initiatives [7]. It is generally admitted that a striking characteristic of China's post-reform local politics is the overwhelming pursuit of economic growth, also known as GDP worship or growth fetishism [1, 4].

In 2007, in response to local governments' reluctance to implement low-carbon policies, the central government introduced the Energy Conservation Target Responsibility System (ECTRS) to ensure local governments compliance with

energy efficiency requirements [6]. The ECTRS is designed to stimulate local bureaucracies to fulfill the tasks and requirements of national arrangements by allocating energy efficiency targets to local governments [5]. Penalties for failure to meet objectives include disqualification of annual honors and investment restrictions. The consequences of the assessment are also used to evaluate the end-of-term performance of local bureaucrats and directly affect their career development. Because the threat of punishment is real, the power of the ECTRS to strengthen local government action was apparently reflected in the second half of 2010, when some local governments lagging behind the program's targets at the time took drastic measures to stimulate the concerned industries and sectors. For instance, in some regions, the supply of electricity to factories, households and public utilities was seriously restricted, leading to social instability and damage to social production.

However, the seemingly effective ECTRS mechanism still has some drawbacks, resulting in failing to provide enough political incentives for some local governments to implement the low-carbon policies. One problem of the design of ECTRS system is that the scoring system used to assess the performance of local governments in energy saving has some loopholes. The procedural standards of many energy efficiency programs are symbolic and easy to meet. But there is no direct correlation between these criteria and the implementation of low-carbon policies. For example, many organizational tasks are given high scores such as organizing relevant meetings. Moreover, the wordings are also too ambiguous, making it easy to earn points. For instance, some targets such as "energy-saving capacity building", "enterprise monitoring" and "low-carbon propaganda" can be achieved with minimal effort by local governments and can't be measured by explicit criteria. As a result of these issues, local governments can get through the assessment procedure with excellent performance without the need for serious implementation of low-carbon policies. Meanwhile, as a key element and the veto standard of the ECTRS, the energy efficiency indicators are so weak that it exacerbates the problem by reducing the incentives of local governments.

It is questionable to use energy intensity (defined as units of energy per unit of GDP) rather than absolute energy consumption as the performance indicator. On the one hand, there is no uniform national indicator for the measurement of energy intensity, so that local officials can use their preferred measurement methods to achieve their goals [10]. On the other hand, as long as the growth of GDP increases more quickly than energy consumption, energy intensity will decrease relatively. This issue makes it possible for local governments to achieve their goals through economic development in fields with lower energy intensity such as real estate development and service industry, instead of implementing low-carbon policies. The lack of reliable local statistics is also usually one of the important reasons for the implementation gap. Ran points out that the limited capacity of local governments and rampant data manipulation has made local energy statistics compiled into number games [10]. There is another relevant issue that local governments are responsible for the Personnel and budget

allocations of the local statistics agency, which gives them a great opportunity to affect local statistics.

There is no doubt that the central government of China has developed a wide range of energy policies to tackle energy security and climate change. However, whether the objectives of these policies can be achieved would ultimately depend on the implementation of local governments. It is clear that one of the main reasons for the implementation gap is the lack of political incentives for local officials to implement low-carbon policies. As a key institutional mechanism for providing political incentives to local bureaucrats to implement low-carbon policies, the ECTRS itself is also limited by some issues.

V. CONCLUSION

The implementation gap, which refers to the disparity between policy intention and policy implementation, is ubiquitous. It is primarily concerned with tripartite stakeholders - the government, the private sector and citizens. Especially local governments, which usually play an important role of policy delivery, are more likely to make use of the loopholes in the system to challenge the central policies because of their own interests and political considerations. Therefore, the institutions and policies themselves must be legitimate and justifiable so that the stakeholders can implement and comply with them. Meanwhile, the design of the policy system should be comprehensive and consistent with the actual needs, and then continue to improve it in the implementation process.

China as the most populous country and the largest developing country in the world, usually face more severe and complicated challenges and issues. The relative scarcity of resources and the need for economic development often lead to conflicting results. Some policies are too costly to implement, and some resources allocation might be used by local officials and interest groups. On the one hand, the central government strongly dominates the policy formulation. On the other hand, local governments have a lot of autonomy in the implementation of policy, which makes them have a lot of operating space. The first case study shows that China's urban pension policy does not provide sufficient publicity for migrant workers who should benefit from it. Both the shortcomings of policy design and the lack of attention from local governments

cause the implementation gap. The second case study does not only indicate the influence of local interests on the implementation of low-carbon policy, but also further analyses the follow-up incentive policy, ECTRS, which aim to stimulate local bureaucrats to achieve policy objectives. However, the design of the incentive policy itself is also flawed. The feasible solution for the implementation gap should be based on the improvement of capacity of governments and appropriate stimulus to local officials.

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