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Implications of Network Governance for an Implementation Perspective on Public Policy

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Abstract

There has been inevitable dynamic change taking place in societies characterized as “network governance,” raising discourse on the continuity of the mainstream top-down and bottom-up policy implementation perspectives. The network governance approach challenges the commonly accepted mainstream views regarding policy implementation for being hierarchical and restricted to the organizational structure of the state, while currently the interaction, interdependence and negotiation of a complex set of actors is prevalent and just as important as the formal structures. This paper, therefore, is a thorough review of the existing body of literature to assess how the new “governance paradigm” labeled as “network governance” is influencing an implementation perspective on public policy. The review unearthed that there are conflicting views such as post modernists who argue the extent of how outdated the implementation perspective and implementation of public policy is itself due to the influence of informal networks suppressing the power of the state. On the other hand, other scholars argue that implementation is not a completely outdated matter, as governments still play a crucial steering role. It was found that the widening of the old perspectives was inevitable to the distinction of government from governance structures, from processes institutions, from behaviors and actors, and from activities. It should also bring about various actors and multi-locus and layered perspective, unlike the hierarchical mere government-focused perspective of the past. Therefore, the implementation perspective under the new governance heading covers a wide range of issues and variables, implying that the new “governance paradigm” and its governing networks altered the existed perspective on implementation, if not contributed to its demise.

Keywords: Governance, network governance, policy implementation, perspectives.



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Introduction

The dominance of the “governance paradigm” in the 1990’s challenged the idea that “governments are at the center of societal developments and problems.” Centralized and hierarchical approaches to dealing with societal problems is regarded as outdated and less applicable (Bekkers, 2007, p.3). Rather, governance networks have gathered sufficient attention, emerging as a consequence of highly fragmented and dynamic societal structure (Torfing, 2007, p. 8).

This has given a new dimension to the policymaking and implementation process of governments. Policymaking is no longer a top-down hierarchical process dominated by governments; having become an outcome of interaction and negotiation of actors in the public and private arena (Bogason & Zolner, 2007, p. 5). Therefore, the main focus of this paper will be to assess how the new “governance paradigm,” labeled as “network governance,” has influenced the implementation perspective.

Yes, there is a change in how society is organized and that we are living in a networked society with a multitude of actors. There is definitely a change, but the issue is how it is impacting on the policy processes that have previously been dominated by governments. A specific concern of this paper is what implications this process has from an implementation perspective.

To deal with this matter, the paper is divided into five sections. This first provides an introduction, while the second section deals with the concept of governance, followed by a discussion on “Network governance.” The third section provides a brief discussion on the meaning of implementation. The fourth part is concerned with how “network governance” has affected the implementation perspective on public policy, and the last section concludes the paper.

Concept of Governance

Meaning of Governance

The usage of the term governance and its concerns are “age old,” even though its meaning and practice as a key concept and practice in public administration is a phenomenon of the 1990’s (Bovaird, 2005, p. 217). Scholars attribute the emergence of governance as an important academic discourse and practice in Political Science and Public Administration to a more or less similar reason. Among the most commonly mentioned is the inability of “the traditional notion of the nation state” to adequately explain existing social realities. Among others, the nation state is challenged by the complexity of social problems and the rise of organized interests (Benz & Papadopoulos, 2006, p. 2). Bogason and Zolner (2007) relate the emergence of governance to a preceding discussion on “new institutionalism” that came about from the inadequacy of the “formal organizational system of government” to explain the “patterns of interactions” in policy formulation and implementation (p. 4). The emergence of governance hence implies that the state should no longer be considered as the sole actors in the management of state societal affairs, as more and more actors are coming to the field with their own objectives and interests.

In light of this, however, the usage of the term and its meaning are not very clear. Bovaird (2005) explained the term as “one of the most contested both in theory and practice” (p. 217), and Rhodes (1996) explained it as it has different meaning in different contexts (as cited in Sorensen & Torfing, 2005, p. 200). Rhodes (1996) defined the term as

“process of governing; or changed condition of ordered rule; or the new method by which society is governed” (p. 653). However, he has also utterly expressed that the usage of the term is not simple and listed at least “six separate usage of governance” as; “corporate governance,” “the New Public Management,” “good governance,” “the minimal state,” “a socio-cybernetic system,” and “self-organizing networks.” The last usage of the term from the list is of greater importance to this paper.

Kooiman (2003), on the other hand, defined it as “the totality of theoretical conceptions on governing” (p. 4), while governing is further defined as;

The totality of interactions in which public as well as private actors participate, aimed at solving societal problems or creating societal opportunities; attending to the institutions as contexts for governing interactions; and establishing normative foundations for all those activities. (p. 4)

By this Kooiman noted the increasing role of actors and their participation in dealing with societal problems in addition to the formal organization of the state.

For the purpose of this paper, the definition of Bovaird and Loffer (2003) is adopted, which states that governance refers to “the ways in which stakeholders interact with each other in order to influence outcomes of public policies” (as cited in Bovaird, 2005, p. 220), since the paper is more about network governance and its implications on an implementation perspective.

Network and Network Governance

As distinctly noted previously, “there is total lack of agreement to the precise meaning of the term governance” (Torfing, 2007, p. 5). In this regard a closer look at the literature indicates “network governance” as one aspect of the governance paradigm. Rhodes (1996) listed six separate uses of the term that shows how broad the use of the term is. Furthermore, Torfing’s listing of the variation of the use of the term as; “good governance,” “economic governance,” “Corporate governance,” “New Public Management,” “Public private corporation and Partnership,” and “Network governance” is further indication of the contextualized meaning of the term under different phenomena. This paper specifically restricts itself to “governance in and through interactive networks of public, semi public and private actors”.

Network in the context of governance refers to “structures involving multiple nodes-agencies and organizations with multiple linkages” (Roberts, 2009, p. III). Such networks could take formal and informal forms and be actively engaged in the planning and designing, producing and delivering of public goods (Roberts, 2009).

Torfing (2007) defined “network governance” as;

A relatively stable, horizontal articulation of independent but operationally autonomous actors who interact through negotiations that take place within a relatively institutionalized community which is self-regulating within limits set by external agencies and contributes to the production of public purpose. (p. 5)

Notwithstanding the importance of all other elements in the definition, the last part is significantly important to this essay. This is because “Production of public purpose” is further explained as statement of “visions, values, plans, policies, rules and actions” that are all directed towards dealing with a particular problem prevailing in the public (Torfing, 2007,

p. 7). This is actually an indication of the network actors influencing not simply the earlier stages of the policy process, but actually also implementation.

It is true that we are living in a networked society. These governing networks are stepping moving into activities that hitherto were restricted as being the government's responsibility and not a matter of choice, but necessity. Reinforcing this fact, it is opined that policy problems are becoming more and more complex with umpteen contradictory demands surrounding them and subjected to dilemmas. They are turning out to be "complex, uncertain and conflict ridden." No separately acting public or private actor could possess all the resource, knowledge and expertise demanded by such problems. Hence "complex system of inter-organizational coordination through negotiated interaction" is inevitably necessary. Networks are also conceived as better options to the benefit of "efficient governance" with the potential for "proactive governance" in identifying problems, opportunities and solutions at earlier stages and solicit the necessary information, knowledge and resources for better political decisions and implementations (Torfing, 2007, p. 8; Sorensen & Torfing, 2007, p. 12).

Above all this, the changing nature of society into complex organized groups of diverse interests has an implication on the authority of governments. Roseneau (2007) argued that "if a state wants to be effective nowadays it cannot simply assert its authority, it expresses it in relation to other distinct spheres of authority" (as cited in Hajer, 2009, p. 35). Nevertheless, it is not only a matter of losing or gaining authority, but reliance on networks for better decisions and achievements. The coordinating capacity of governance networks are becoming an increasing input to governments who are even putting effort to form governance networks. Networks supplement government efforts by affording easy access to various target groups, with less exercise of power and saving scarce resources (Torfing, 2007, pp. 9-11). Hence it is indispensable that actors other than those in the formal organizational structure of governments are involved in the policy process, including implementation.

A thorough look at their defining characteristics clearly indicates that governance networks are "dependent on one another's resource," "operationally autonomous" – taking command from no other superiors, "independent" – linked horizontally than vertically, but not implying their equality in terms of resource and authority and no hierarchical control can be attained without damaging their healthy operation. Moreover, actors remain in the networks only as long as they want (Sorensen & Torfing, 2007, pp. 9-10). In addition, they depend on the values of "reputation, trust, reciprocity and mutual interdependence" (Rhodes, 1996, p. 659). Therefore, governments and their formal organizations operate as one but important actor steering "shared understanding between organizations and stakeholders in a policy network in order to create a common and trust worthy policy practice through interactions" (Fenger & Bekkers, 2007, p. 24).

These interactive networks may not be provided in any of the formal rules, regulations and constitutions guiding formal interactions among state organizations. Neither are they imposed by the state by any other means. Rather they are an inevitable outgrowth of the changing structure of societies heading towards organized interests. "Network governance is neither market, nor government, nor civil society; it is a hybrid organizational form" (Bogason & Zolner, 2007, p. 5).

All this discussion boils down to the fact that states no longer have the "monopoly of power and authority" in the process of governance (Pierre, 2000, p. 4). Even it is apparent

that it needs networked interactions among governmental and nongovernmental actors in order to deal with complex, uncertain and conflictual policy issues with concerted efforts, resources and knowledge of all actors. Furthermore the policymaking process is no longer similar to what it seemed before. Constellations of actors have become involved, from setting the agenda through to implementation. Therefore, keeping all other earlier policy processes aside (for this paper), the concern will be on what implications does this “network governance” have on an implementation perspective hitherto conceived as being under the monopoly of governments in the policy process.

Policy Implementation

Policies actually composes “intentions,” “actions,” and “inactions” (Hill & Hupe, 2009, p. 4). All formulated policies might not be implemented. However, once “resources, knowledge and efforts are devoted” to realize decisions into actions the “Policy cycle of implementation stage starts” (Howlett, Ramesh, & Perl, 2009, p. 160). As it appears in the later stage of the policy cycle, implementation “presuppose a prior act” of decision on what is to be done and how, in connection with specific policies and in response to particular problems (Hill & Hupe, 2009, pp. 4-6). Therefore implementation presupposes a problem, the need for action and decision.

For Webster and Roger (xxxx), implementation refers to; “carryout, accomplish, fulfil, produce, complete,” as what is actually implemented is a policy (as cited in Hill & Hupe, 2009, p. 3). Similarly Mazmanian and Sabatier (1983) also defined it as “carrying out a basic policy decision usually incorporated in a statute, but which can also take the form of important executive orders or court decisions” (as cited in Hill & Hupe, 2009, p. 7). Both definitions presuppose the beginning of some prior action without which implementation cannot take place (Hill & Hupe, 2009, p. 4).

Another decisive issue in discussing implementation is who implements a policy decision and what actors are involved in it. For this, Howlett et al. (2009) seem to have a clear-cut answer; “bureaucrats are the most significant actors in most policy implementation” (p. 160). In this regard, it is also important to look into what Hill and Hupe (2009) labeled as “normative issue” by inquiring if formulators or decision-makers have more power or legitimized role than implementers (p. 4). This leads us to the issue of which part of the government has a more pronounced role in implementation. Is it that officials at the highest level pass decisions and set goals, and bureaucrats then stick to it for implementation; or the underlying reality within the bureaucracy has more influence on policy implementation? This is what most prominent perspectives on implementation debate.

However, of much more concern for this paper, beyond an implementation perspective in the formal hierarchical structure of government, is; how the changing nature of society into organized interests and networks under the “network governance” label impacts implementation perspective on public policy. In this new era of “network governance,” is an implementation perspective going to remain the same or is there or will there be a change of discourse and practice as more and more new actors are coming to the fore with their interests and objectives.?

Implications of Network Governance on Implementation Perspective

Until the early 1970’s, implementation, as a policy stage, was regarded as unproblematic. The assumption was that what matters are decisions, and once policies are

decided upon it can be easily carried out by the bureaucracy. There has been assertion about clarity of “political mandates” whereby administrators would specifically do what was demanded of them by higher-level officials (Hill & Hupe, 2009, p. 43; Howlett et al., 2009, p. 163). However, this period marked the change in the perception towards policy implementation after observing that something could go wrong on implementation and hence appear to be policy failure. This goes in line with what Hill and Hupe (2009) labeled as the “black box” in the administration process between “policy formulation” and “policy outcomes” in policy analysis (p. 42).

Thus, this period marked practical and scholastic concerns for implementation that led to the developing perspective on implementation, with more studies conducted on the “how” of implementation. The “top down” and “bottom up” perspective is the most prominent that dominated the literature on implementation for a long period.

For the top-down perspective, policy implementation becomes successful in the top-down process. Effective implementation is an outcome of realizing a policy by street-level bureaucrats as laid down and originally ratified by public officialdom. Hence the main task of the bureaucracy is to achieve “objectives set forth in original policy decisions” (Hill & Hupe, 2009, p. 45; Howlett et al., 2009, p. 164). In this regard, for instance, Hogwood and Gunn (1984) argued that “those who make policy are democratically elected” and what is expected of them is to ensure the fulfilment of all conditions necessary for implementers to realize the goals set by top-level managers (Hill & Hupe, 2009, p. 50). Wildavsky’s (1973) view of “agencies cooperation close to 100% if implementation should not fail” is also interpreted as the top-down view of the inability of achieving “purposive actions among multiple actors” (p. 45). Hence, policies are best achieved when street-level bureaucrats apply them as intended by policymakers at the top.

On the other hand, for the bottom-up approach, what is important for policy implementation is the behavior of street-level bureaucrats. Here, the adaptive behavior of street-level bureaucrats searching for the means to realize goals on the ground is what ensures implementation effectiveness (Howlett et al., 2009, p. 164). Therefore, implementation is a bargaining process and “actions mainly depending upon compromise between people in various parts of a single organization” (Barret & Fudge, 1978, as cited in Hill & Hupe, 2009, p. 54). Thus, policy formulation and implementation are not separate processes as policy is influenced by the implementers.

The crux of the matter, however, is how this perspective applies in the era of “network governance,” which has prevailed as a “functional response of increasingly fragmented, complex and dynamic society” (Torfing, 2007, p. 8).

The perspective is hierarchical and restricted to the organizational structure of the state, while currently the interaction, interdependence and negotiation of complex sets of actors is what really influences the policy process including implementation. This is an outgrowth of inevitable dynamic change taking place in societies characterized as “network governance.”

To the exact reinforcement of this idea, Torfing (2007) opined that;

Whereas imperative state regulation aims to translate the substantial political values of the government into detailed laws and regulations that are implemented and enforced by publicly employed bureaucrats....By contrast, overnance networks make decisions and regulate various issues in and through reflexive interactions that involves ongoing

negotiations between a plurality of actors who build on their interdependencies in order to produce joint decisions and collective solutions in the face of persistent conflicts between divergent interests, conceptions and world views. (p. 12)

This stated view clearly indicates that governments' monopoly of power as a sole policymaking and implementation body is weakening, and that many more actors are joining the field. This will have a significant implication on the hitherto dominant implementation perspective and to the study and practice of implementation itself.

The emerging notion of governance engulfs a wider scope, going much beyond the concentration on government as a locus. In this view, actions aimed at governing involve many more actors than just the government, including "corporate and non-profit actors" to the dismay of mere reliance on hierarchical interaction on the exercise of authority. What is particularly relevant here is that, "the concept provides a different, but continued focus on implementation" (Hill & Hupe, 2009, p. 101). Thus the notion of governance gives a very different look to an implementation perspective without completely ceasing it.

Given these facts, a change in implementation perspectives because of the governance paradigm could be out of the question. Arguing mere top-down and bottom-up options for effective policy implementation while many more powerful actors are influencing the whole process might not be feasible. Rhodes (1996) argued to the extent of the dwindling central governments' power to just one actor among equals in the system because of the emergence of governance networks. His argument finally boils down to suggesting the "hollowing out of the state" (Lundqvist, 2001, pp. 1-2). His argument could be a powerful indication as to what is happening to the already existing implementation perspective and the practice of it.

The magnitude with which the governance paradigm influenced implementation perspective is still an area of discourse. Some are even speaking about the outdated of implementation perspective and implementation of public policy itself. Smith (1994), in a view of the "post-modernist" perspective, characterized the state as a "political system disoriented, deficient and out of sorts with itself" (as cited in Hill & Hupe, 2009, p. 80), indicating the outdated of implementation. Still, other scholars argue that implementation is not a completely outdated matter, stating that it will continue "as a useful conceptual tool" in order to examine the success or failure of policies (John, 1998, as cited in Hill & Hupe, 2009, p. 12).

Hill and Hupe (2009) posed two fundamental queries in this regard; What will happen to the observation and study of implementation if the flourishing period of the nation state is almost over? And, does the governance paradigm affect the examination of implementation by making it more or less relevant? (Hill & Hupe, 2009).

Here it could be quite important to look at some empirical studies on policy implementation related directly to "network governance." Lundqvist's (2001) "crucial test" of contradictory views on "network governance" and its impact on the authority of governments based on the study on the implementation of Swedish environmental policy could be seen as one of the best examples. In Lundqvist's (2001) study, Rhodes is represented as arguing that the state is "hollowing out," leaving its traditional authority to networked actors and just being one among equals. On the other hand, Pierre and Pieters opined about the transformation of the states' role from "constitutional powers" towards coordinating and fusing "private and public interests." The empirical presentation of facts

from the case study finally indicated that governments have not have to completely surrender to the new actors, and are a playing a crucial steering role affecting the implementation process (Lundquvist, 2001, p. 333). The study by no means ruled out the importance of networked actors, while at the same time indicating governments as important actors in the implementation process maintain some level of “hierarchical relations.” Hence it is possible to say that the governance paradigm has its impact on an implementation perspective, but not to the extent of completely ceasing it as a paradigm and practice.

Hill and Hupe (2009) assertively argued that;

Under the governance paradigm, implementation is still there, but as under the NPM paradigm, in a hidden form. Other than in the policy-implementation paradigm, implementation is not seen as following formulation- and- decision in a vertical chain-like relationship. Nor is it hidden behind contracts, as under the New Public Management Paradigm. In the governance paradigm, in as much as focus is on the new “horizontal” mode of governance in the form of network management, the latter can be seen as an externalized process of policy formation in which governments act together with a variety of public and private actors. (p. 109)

The preexisting vertical hierarchical chains and ties are now loose and light in serving the function of tying various societal actors to coordinate their efforts and cooperate among each other (Hill & Hupe, 2009).

Nobody could doubt that policies will continue to be formulated and put into action irrespective of who is the most influential actor in implementing it and the number and mix of actors involved in the process. Hill and Hupe (2009) are also clear in conceding that the governance paradigm has contributed in outdateding the top-down–bottom-up debate and the top-down control emphasis became particularly irrelevant. However, one thing that will keep on going are; “issues of purposive action and control over policy process.” Thus, implementation and its study will continue “under whatever heading” and whoever dominates it (Hill & Hupe, 2009, pp. 201-202).

The continuity of policymaking and purposive action towards it is a sound idea. But if it is going to continue, under what heading or what new forms of change will be observed on an implementation perspective could still be an issue that must be addressed.

The practice and study of implementation was there even before it was propelled into the level of paradigm, and the same will continue after the implementation paradigm is replaced by a new paradigm (Hill & Hupe, 2009, p. 203). Here, understandably when they say the “new paradigm,” Hill and Hupe (2009) are referring to the “governance paradigm” replacing the former. They can still be quoted for stating that, “governance has consequence for the way the object of implementation research is defined” and kept on arguing that “implementation research can be placed under the heading of governance research, but in doing so it has to be broadened” (Hill & Hupe, 2009, p. 15).

This will have a wider impact on the existing implementation perspective. Under the new heading, it is going to be studied as a different and wider perspective incorporating many more actors and different structural emphasis, from vertical-hierarchical to horizontal and “multi-focal.”

Some crucial implications can be pointed out of the widening of the “implementation paradigm” into the new “governance paradigm.” First, the new perspective will have a widened focus, expanding its range of concern into “the distinction between government and governance, the difference between structures and processes, between institutions and behavior and between actors and activities” (Hill & Hupe, 2009, p. 15). Instead of being limited only to top-level officials and street-level bureaucrats’ interactions in the context of policy implementation. The new “governance paradigm” is very much broader in scope, expanding its actors from the mere locus of government to various corporate and nonprofit actors engaging in actions. Hence, it broadens “instead of reducing the number of variables seen as relevant for the explanation of implementation behavior” (Hill & Hupe, 2009, p. 101). Thus, the new perspective looks at more variables to examine implementation behavior than the old one.

Second, the top-down–bottom-up hierarchical emphasis to the study of policy implementation may no longer be feasible. Instead, “variety of institutional relations are addressed, both vertical and horizontal” (Hill & Hupe, 2009, p. 15). This is very much sound given the mix of actors involved in the policy process.

Hill and Hupe (2009) also pointed to the new emphasis added to the act of management in the new perspective. “Conscious efforts” of managers to coordinate “concerted” efforts and resources of various actors to “carry out established collective purpose” could be another area of emphasis for the new implementation perspective under the governance heading (O’Toole, 2000b, as cited in Hill & Hupe, 2009, p. 16).

In a nutshell it can be said that the new “governance paradigm” and its governing networks altered the existed perspective on implementation, if not contributed to its demise.

Conclusion

The emergence of the “governance paradigm” in the 1990’s as a new concept and practice with its diverse meaning, influenced the way governments carry out their activities and the discourse in the policy process. “Network governance” implies the flourishing of a multitude of actors other than those known to exist in the formal hierarchical structure of the state, stepping into what was hitherto conceived as the role of the state. Some scholars such as Rhodes (1996), even argued in line with the “dwindling of governments to a position as one among equals in a system of self-organizing...networks” (as cited in Lundquist, 2001, p. 1).

On the other hand, implementation was regarded as an easy and less problematic process until the 1970’s by focusing upon decision-making processes which will be later easily handled by the bureaucracy. However, later on, failures in policies indicated pitfalls in implementation and gave rise to well-articulated perspectives on implementation (Howlett et al., 2009, p. 163). This is what Hill and Hupe (2009) regarded as a “distinct kind of approach to the study of implementation,” arguing that implementation studies even precede this period (Howlett et al., 2009, p. 42).

In connection with the emergence of the new governance paradigm however, the predominant perspective on implementation that focuses on top-down–bottom-up governmental hierarchical structure appeared to be less applicable and outdated. Apparently, it sounds that an analysis of policymaking and implementation that excludes

networks of actors who influence the policy process including implementation, could be less feasible and inapplicable.

In light of this, the “post-modernist” perspective even suggested the demise of implementation as a perspective and practice (Hill & Hupe, 2009, p. 80). John (1998), for instance, suggested that “concept of implementation” could be only applied as a tool to analyze policy success and failure and cannot by any means be considered as a separate field of study or perspective (as cited in Hill & Hupe, 2009, p. 12).

However, governments are still nowadays playing a crucial steering role as indicated by empirical studies such as Lundqvist (2001), which might not indicate the demise of implementation as a perspective and practice. In this case it might be feasible to dwell upon Hill and Hupe’s (2009) generalization that implementation will go on as long as “decisions agreed in the face of collective ambitions goes on.” Its label may change or it may be approached from a different concept like governance, but actions on “collective ambitions” will keep on existing. Finally, the implementation perspective under the new governance heading covers a wide range of issues and variables. It includes various actors and a multi-locus and layered perspective unlike the hierarchical mere government focused perspective of the past. It may also focus on the study of managers as coordinators of concerted efforts of a multitude of actors (Hill & Hupe, 2009, pp. 15-16, 205).

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