Policy Implementation in Hong Kong

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Policy implementation has been defined as "the process of carrying out public policy directives" (Nakamura and Smallwood, 1980: 1). It has, in the past, been seen to be part of a sequential, top-down, process which begins with the formulation and development of policy objectives, proceeds in the implementation stage with putting these objectives into practice, and ends with monitoring the outcome and assessing its impact. Much of the recent academic interest in policy implementation has centred around the observable fact that many governmental programmes serve as good, but expensive, examples of how not to get things done (Pressman and Wildavsky, 1973; McLaughlin, 1976; Ripley and Franklin, 1982). There has, in consequence, been some emphasis in the literature on the need to develop new models of implementation and to recognize the importance, in Bardach's (1977) terms, of the players, normally bureaucrats, in the implementation game. What this has meant, theoretically, is the rejection or modification of the classical hierarchical model, which assumes an unidirectional sequence in which policy formulators choose and instruct and policy implementers deliver (Nakamura and Smallwood, 1980: 9), in favour of one in which the significance of the interaction between formulators and implementers is taken into account (McLaughlin, 1976).

The argument presented in this article, however, is, in effect, a reversion to the earlier, top-down view of policy implementation. There are two broad reasons for considering policy implementation in Hong Kong from this perspective. First, it has recently been recognized that the "very strength in stressing the importance of the implementation process as distinguishable from the policy-making process, and deserving of study in its own right, has tended to lead to the weakness of over-emphasising the distinctiveness of the two processes" (Ham and Hill, 1984: 95). This observation is particularly apposite in the case of Hong Kong. A central tenet of the analysis in this article is that policy implementation in Hong Kong is effective precisely because a disproportionate amount of human and financial resources has been expended in making it so. Because the public purse is not limitless, effective policy implementation has been achieved, to some extent, at the expense of innovative policy-making, long-term planning and, especially, of the monitoring of policy outcomes. In short, one aspect of the policy process has been strengthened to the detriment of other aspects.

It should also be recognized, however, that, at the project implementation level, a top-down approach, even if accompanied by the provision of adequate resources, might be frustrated by both environmental factors and by the need for co-ordination and co-operation between government departments. Bowden (1986) estimates that

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over 50 per cent of problems associated with implementation lie with other implementing units outside the direct jurisdiction of either the project manager or his parent agency. The needs of policy implementation often simply do not match the organizational categories into which the work of government is formally divided. Indeed, the larger the project the more likely the requirements of co-operation and the tensions of competing jurisdictions. Later in this article, I examine the critical case of housing policy in Hong Kong and how a top-down approach can be affected by factors outside the control of the individual department.

Nonetheless, a top-down perspective on policy implementation in Hong Kong remains an appropriate focus because of a range of historical, cultural and spatial factors which tend to support the prevailing classical hierarchical system. The Hong Kong government attempts to maintain a rigorous (although sometimes artificial) distinction between the making of policy and its implementation. Civil servants in line positions are not encouraged to interact with policy-makers and, in many instances, they do not see it as part of their duties to do so. They view their role as one in which they execute policy decisions made elsewhere. In consequence, the mutual interaction between policy-makers and implementers (McLaughlin, 1976) found in more participative cultures and bureaucracies is not present, at least to the same degree, in the Hong Kong context.

The Policy Context

The most significant determining feature of the policy context in Hong Kong is the territory's reversion to Chinese sovereignty in 1997. This will probably require considerable re-thinking on the way in which policy is made and implemented (Scott, 1986a). For the present, however, traditional influences continue to prevail and historical, cultural and spatial factors have all tended to reinforce the acceptance and operation of a classical hierarchical system.

Hong Kong's colonial status has had an important impact on policy-making and implementation in the territory. Its administrative tradition has been largely derived from British experience modified, in some cases, by specific conditions applying locally. Until 1967, the government had a very rudimentary administrative structure and very restricted objectives. While it would probably be incorrect, even in that period, to characterise Hong Kong as a laissez-faire state (Rabushka, 1979: 83; Friedman, 1980: 54-55), if only because this misses an important distinction between laissez-faire and a capitalist state (Woll, 1974: 56-57), it is fair to say that, with the single exception of the public housing programme, minimal government was the order of the day. This is evident in the very limited policy-making capacity of the government before 1967 and the belief that problems could be solved simply by creating more line posts. 'Value for money' was, and continues to be, the watch-word of the Hong Kong government. But if the problems are conceived to be labour-intensive, and if that labour is relatively inexpensive in comparison, say, with Britain, then it makes sense to employ lowly paid artisans to do the job. The consequence, however, was that Hong Kong's administrative structure developed a rather bottom-heavy profile; over 44 per cent of the civil service in 1967 were labourers or artisans (see Table 1). Subsequent political developments, and greater governmental concern with social pro-