Public Bureaucracy and Policy Implementation in Singapore

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Introduction

One of the strengths of the public bureaucracy in Singapore is that it is highly efficient in terms of policy implementation, i.e., public policies which are formulated are usually implemented without fail. This flawless record in policy implementation in Singapore is quite unusual given the poor record of policy implementation efforts in the Third World in general. The purpose of this paper is to describe and evaluate the public bureaucracy's role in policy implementation in Singapore. More specifically, it will attempt to explain why public policies are usually implemented successfully in Singapore and to identify the lessons that can be learnt about policy implementation from Singapore's experience.

This paper is divided into five sections. The first section provides a brief description of the policy context in terms of those salient factors which affect policy implementation. The second section provides background information on the size, structure and functions of the public bureaucracy. The third section describes the policy implementation process in Singapore by referring to the Housing and Development Board's (HDB) public housing programmes to illustrate the public bureaucracy's role in policy implementation in Singapore. The fourth section is devoted to an evaluation of the public bureaucracy's role in policy implementation. Those factors responsible for Singapore's success in policy implementation will be identified and discussed in this section. Finally, the lessons that could be learnt from Singapore's experience in policy implementation will be dealt with.

Before proceeding further, it is necessary to define three terms here, viz., "public policy", "policy implementation", and "public bureaucracy". For the purposes of this paper, "public policy" is defined as:


(Quah, 1984a: 109)

Once a public policy has been formulated by the policy-makers, the stage is set for the second phase of the policy-making process, i.e., policy implementation. According to Van Meter and Van Horn (1975: 447) policy implementation refers to

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“those actions by public and private individuals (or groups) that are directed at the achievement of objectives set forth in prior policy decisions”. Policy implementation can thus be defined as “those actions taken by public organizations and their members in order to attain the goals identified by the policy-makers during the policy formulation stage” (Quah, 1984a: 118). More specifically, policy implementation involves these three activities: (1) the identification of the implementing agencies and implementors; (2) the allocation of responsibilities and resources among the various implementing agencies; and (3) the monitoring of the activities of both the implementing agencies and implementors.

Following Peabody and Rourke (1965: 803), the term “public bureaucracy” as used in this paper refers to the governmental bureaucracy in Singapore, which includes not only the Singapore Civil Service (SCS) but also the various statutory boards.

The Policy Context

The policy context refers to all those aspects of the Singapore environment which influence the formulation, implementation, and evaluation of public policies. Perhaps the most thorough definition of “policy context” is provided by Leichter (1979: 41–42) who defines “policy context” in terms of the interaction between those situational, structural, cultural, and environmental factors which influence the public policy-making process.

Four aspects of the policy context in Singapore deserve mention here because they influence the way in which public policies are formulated and implemented: its geography, its economy, its population, and its political system.

In terms of geography, Singapore is a city-state with a total land area of 621.7 square kilometres. Its rural sector is negligible since the small island is highly urbanized and only 39.7 square kilometres (6.4 per cent) of the total land area are farm holding areas (Ng, 1987: 1). Indeed, Singapore’s compactness and its high degree of urbanization have strengthened the policy-making process in three ways. First, the island’s diminutiveness is advantageous for policy formulation and implementation since communication is seldom a problem and serves to enhance political control by the leadership. A second advantage of smallness is that it improves administrative coordination and integration and promotes responsiveness on the part of public officials. Thus, unlike Indonesia and Malaysia, which are much larger in size, Singapore’s smallness has contributed to a highly centralized public bureaucracy, which is not afflicted by the same problems faced by a federal public bureaucracy in its interaction with the state or provincial bureaucracies. Finally, the absence of a large rural sector not only reinforces the centralized nature of the public bureaucracy, but also implies that the latter is not burdened by problems stemming from rural-urban migration or from rural development programmes because there is no need for such programmes in the first place (Quah, 1984a: 109–110).

When the People’s Action Party (PAP) leaders assumed power in June 1959, they encountered two serious problems: a high unemployment rate and a severe housing shortage. Accordingly, the PAP government created the Housing and Development Board (HDB) in February 1960 to solve the housing problem and the Economic Development Board (EDB) in August 1961 to implement its industrialization pro-