
Practitioners' Seminar: Improving Policy Execution for Successful Public Sector Reform

How to improve policy execution and the support provided for successful public sector reform?

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The [Policy Execution Hub](#) hosted a seminar on *Improving Policy Execution for Successful Public Sector Reform* to reflect on challenges to policy execution in lower and middle-income countries and discuss approaches to tackling them. A group of seasoned practitioners – consultants, non-governmental organisations, and donors – explored how emerging thinking on Problem Driven Iterative Adaptation (PDIA), systems approach, Thinking and Working Politically, behavioural science for public policy, and delivery units impact on public sector implementation effectiveness.

A series of themes emerged from the discussion of this broad variety of approaches to tackling challenges to policy execution.

The **benefit of trial and error**. Recognising the complexity of challenges to policy execution calls for setting aside pre-determined technical solution, many suggested that sometimes the most appropriate approach is to embrace uncertainty, and experiment to find out what works in the context. Development practitioners and donors alike frequently discuss the shift in programme design and management that emphasises the need to find appropriate, contextual solutions to locally identified problems. Beyond the heuristic, in practice, many organisations experiment with adaptive logframes, where they abard following the same 'recipe' to produce the same results in different contexts, with different actors.

- In [Problem Driven Iterative Adaptation](#), for instance, problem diagnosis is key. Those involved must approach the problem without any preconceptions about the solution, and be 'agnostic' as to the what approach or tools to be adopted. There is also a need for programmes to start small and look to build on success, rather than attempting to do everything at once.
- [Thinking and Working Politically](#) provides a framework for getting to the heart of problems and understanding relationships rather than simply treating symptoms. This implies that political thinking needs to be better integrated into programme design to monitor political incentives and cycles as an integral part of programming and reporting.
- In systems, [change](#) involves multiple feedback loops and critical junctures. Power is the 'underlying force field', but insufficient attention is paid to informal power structures and social norms. Additionally, programme design needs to be informed by how well the actors understand the context, and their confidence in the intervention. Where both of these are limited, practitioners should look to identify and understand positive deviance within systems.
- Testing and adaptation is at the center of applying [behavioural science](#) to public policy. Rigorous research methods are used to understand what works, how and why it works.

Make it safe to fail. Even if there is a stated commitment to trial and error, any attempt to improve policy execution needs to have the corresponding mechanisms and tools to create an environment where it is not costly for people to admit failure. Properly designed M&E frameworks facilitate a

commitment to learning, reflection, and honest conversations. To address this need, besides the common questions to guide the design of M&E systems – ‘*What do you hope to achieve with the programme?*’ ‘*Which information do you need to know whether you are achieving this?*’ – practitioners may want to consider also ‘*How will you reflect about the programme during implementation, and integrate that reflection in the programme design?*’. This way, the programme will have an embedded component that creates the opportunity for reflection and adaptation.

People-centered approaches are useful when driving initiatives to improve policy execution. This can include better understanding of politics, building individual capacity, and recognising that development is a human-centered discipline.

- Behavioural science uses research about how people behave, while admitting that people are unpredictable and sometimes ‘irrational’, and that the organisational and institutional context can influence their individual decision-making.
- While thinking politically comes naturally to many, working politically remains a challenge. This can be addressed by making TWP a daily mindset – not just a narrative, but in the design of and integrated into job descriptions, with the necessary accompanying skills shift.
- The role of an ‘external’ practitioner in building state capability through PDIA always needs to be at arm’s length. It’s about facilitating the government or organisation to build its own capability – giving work back to the government, and coaching rather than doing the work.
- There is need for a skills shift: working in a politically informed and adaptive manner requires certain skills which may not be in the ordinary repertoire. Training is needed so that programme designers can convert their often extensive ‘background political knowledge’ into more effective interventions. Leadership skills for local actors are crucial to sustainability, while ‘external’ actors should transition to coaching roles.

The group explored tools for driving government performance: the role of delivery units as catalysts for strengthening policy execution, and the development of productivity measures for public sector.

- **Not all problems require adaptive processes to solve them.** In some cases, strengthening control over the delivery systems may improve the outcomes. One example is the use of delivery units, when clear mandate and authority driven by political priorities pushes for favourable results for the citizens. A case study of using delivery units to drive government results in health and education was presented during the seminar.
- **Breaking down the problem will help identify the adequate solutions.** For instance, a presentation on government productivity showed the participants how composite measures of productivity in the public sector vary widely sometimes within the same organisation, only when crossing the corridor.

The seminar overall concluded that an issue-based approach would be beneficial to our work to strengthen policy execution and deliver public sector reform. In some cases, increased authority may drive the change process. In other, more sophisticated contexts and more complex issues, the answer may be moving away from the blueprint approach, breaking down problems, making it safe to fail while searching for solutions with trial and error.

This workshop is the first external event held by the Policy Execution Hub, an Oxford Policy Management initiative. The Policy Execution Hub is a centre of expertise on public sector change, focused on investigating and documenting what works in improving policy execution and service delivery. We are looking to draw from a broad range of expertise to understand better why policy execution fails, how we can minimize this failure and how to best ensure that the change supported by actors external to the government is successful and sustainable.