Opening up the “Black Box” in Evaluating Neighborhood Problems: The Implementation Process in Israel’s Project Renewal

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How successful is a particular neighborhood program? This question poses a special challenge for evaluation research. This paper demonstrates how implementation analysis can be utilized to reinforce the evaluation endeavor. Israel’s Project Renewal is the laboratory. As a large-scale national program that encompasses most towns in Israel, it provides what few programs can: the possibility of studying a large enough sample of neighborhoods to cover diversity, yet in the context of a small, unitary-system country that provides the canopy of shared national policy, institutional structure and administrative norms.

CHARACTERISTICS OF NEIGHBORHOOD PROGRAMS

Neighborhood programs usually share several characteristics. These are very different from the characteristics of, say, a nutrition program for the aged poor. Whereas traditional evaluation research may be the best methodology for evaluating single-purpose, targeted programs, neighborhood programs require a different approach.

First, neighborhood programs are usually broad-aimed: They seek to accomplish a variety of goals on many fronts so as to change the interdependent characteristics that make up a neighborhood in distress. This means that they do not call for a single well-defined outcome that can be easily measured. Second, often the goals are not fully articulated, tend to be specific to each neighborhood, and change with time. Third, the problems that the program seeks to solve often include "wicked problems" and "meta-problems" (Rittel and Webber, 1973; Cartwright, 1973) whose attributes, extent, and possible cures are not fully understood. Fourth, being area-based, neighborhood programs are likely to cater to a variety of populations, rather than to specific groups with shared problems. Some of these groups may have conflicting interests, and might perceive the program’s goals, as well as its accomplishments, in different ways.

Last, for the implementation of their broad-ranging goals, neighborhood programs are likely to require changes in the existing modes of decision making in agencies currently delivering services in the neighborhood; for example: better coordination, greater
accessibility to residents, or a higher capacity to tolerate innovation. After all, the existing administrative modes might themselves have been part of the problem—an expression of the greater dependency of the poor on government services and of their lesser capacity for leveraging power. Certain institutional and administrative changes may therefore be counted as substantive outcomes.

Project renewal is Israel’s ambitious program for uplifting poor neighborhoods. With the first batch of neighborhoods entering in 1979-80, today the project encompasses some 90 neighborhoods and is Israel’s major social and housing program, covering approximately 15 percent of the country’s population. The project calls for a concerted onslaught on each neighborhood, offering programs in housing and infrastructure improvement, educational enrichment, welfare, social and community activities, health care, and lately also modest beginnings in economic development and job training. Project Renewal thus embodies the special characteristics of neighborhood programs with highlighted contours.

**INTRODUCING IMPLEMENTATION ANALYSIS INTO EVALUATION RESEARCH**

Many of the problems with traditional evaluation research arise from its focus on the assessment of outcomes and its concern with proving a causal relationship, while ignoring the process that produced these outcomes (Alterman, Carmon and Hill, 1984). After many decades of reigning supreme, this approach has in recent years been criticized for being oblivious to the needs of decision makers, often remaining unused; for taking too long and costing too much (Whooley, 1979); for ignoring the goals of participants other than the legislators and high-level officials (House, 1980); for assuming a set of fixed goals which in practice soon drift along and become remolded (Kress, Koehler and Springer, 1981); and for possibly ignoring important happenings while busy with sophisticated (and costly) testing.

An alternative approach, process evaluation, has been gradually evolving in recent years. It has been tagged by one author as "revisionist" (Sharp, 1981). This approach is more utilization-focused, sometimes preferring shortcuts and qualitative analysis of outcomes over costly methods that might take a long time to yield results (Whooley, 1979; Patton, 1978, 1980; Madsen, 1983). It argues that the obsession of traditional evaluation research with proving a causal link has led it to view the implementation process as a "black box" which is of interest only in its outputs. Rather than relying solely on experimental or quasi-experimental research design to bridge the long span between planning intent and outcomes, this approach opts for a "close-causation" alternative that focuses on the series of steps leading
to outcomes (Thomas, 1981). It thus alleviates the burden of finding a causal link based on the outcomes only.

Yet the methodology of process evaluation has often been intuitive, yielding an avalanche of descriptive data of the "who said what to whom" genre. A more analytic base can be found in the adjacent, yet separate, field of implementation analysis (recently summed up in Sabatier, 1986). However, it has largely been incognizant of its affinity to evaluation research and its capacity to step in and fill the methodological gap by systematically illuminating the black box of the implementation process (Alterman, 1982, 1983). In the research approach adopted for evaluating Project Renewal, we grafted implementation analysis onto evaluation research, relying on it to expose and evaluate the decision process in carrying out the program.

APPROACH TO IMPLEMENTATION ANALYSIS OF PROJECT RENEWAL

The central questions asked in analyzing the implementation process of Project Renewal were: to what extent have the operational principles of the project been met through the institutions created and the decisions made? Have they operated well enough to enable the project to produce outputs that can be expected to lead to the desired outcomes? An ancillary question was: to what extent can the changes produced in institutional structure or modes of decision making be regarded as substantive outcomes in their own right?

What should be the methodology for studying implementation? Currently, there are two competing points of views in the field of implementation analysis (Alterman, 1983). One approach which has come from American theorists over the past decade judges implementation by the degree to which decisions of lower-order agencies have furthered or inhibited fulfillment of some formal policy. (Examples of research adopting this point of view are Pressman and Wildavsky, 1973; Van Meter and Van Horn, 1975; Montjoy and O'Toole, 1979; and most distinctly, Sabatier and Mazmanian, 1981.) This approach has been called "top-down" by a group of British theorists who claim that viewing all subsequent decisions in light of the formal policy is an artificial and fruitless task, for it ignores the independent life that the implementation process takes on. These scholars would rather focus on the dynamics of actual actions and responses, each within its own context (Barrett and Fudge, 1981).

Both approaches have merit, and future directions of theory should search for a synthesis (Sabatier, 1986). While recognizing the importance of the formal policy as a reference point for evaluation, a combined approach should also be able to assess the impact of the formal policy from the bottom up—the perspective of the action context where the policy is carried out.
This study creates such a synthesis through its methodology. Rather than studying implementation from the vantage point of the central administration, the study focuses on the perspective of a sample of 10 neighborhoods representing different regions, towns and neighborhood sizes. The four-year study began in 1982 and the field research was carried out through 1984. The analysis of the implementation process combined a participant observation method with a more structured evaluation. Each neighborhood was assigned a field researcher who participated in meetings and events, followed official decisions and became personally acquainted with the decision makers and the neighborhood leaders. To structure the evaluation, the field researchers were given a uniform set of guiding questions that served as criteria for evaluation. In their written responses, they relied, in addition to their own observations, on interviews with key informants whom they judged to be reliable, on budget documents, on protocols of meetings, and on other formal or informal documents, as required.

EVALUATING THE IMPLEMENTATION PROCESS IN PROJECT RENEWAL

To carry out its ambitious goals, Project Renewal had to create a suitable institutional machinery that could lift the load. The project also had to create a shake-up in existing modes of doing government business. This implied a need for innovation. Successful implementation of the project’s goals would depend on the degree to which six major operational principles were fulfilled. Public participation is the seventh principle, but since it is at once a principle of implementation and a social goal, it is covered separately (see Churchman in this volume). Some of these principles represent purely organizational objectives, yet crucial to the project’s success; others are the institutional or administrative expression of the project’s substantive goals.

Reliance on Existing Agencies for Service Delivery, While Maintaining a Clear and Effective Organizational Structure

Aware of the failure of Israel’s Urban Renewal Agency of the late 1960s where a new agency was assigned the task of treading over the toes of existing powerful government bodies (Alexander, 1980), the project’s designers declared their intention that the project rely on existing agencies for service delivery, adding only a modest superstructure for planning, coordination and evaluation. However, this also meant a complex structure composed of that which exists, plus that which would be added. An effective institutional machinery should be equipped with clear hierarchical integration and decision rules supportive of the program (Sabatier and Mazmanian, 1981).
In practice, the institutional structure that evolved was far from clear, nor free from conflicts. For a start, the project required the cooperation of two "in-laws"--the Israel Government and the Jewish Agency. The Jewish Agency is an organization of the world’s Jewish people, which has long before the establishment of Israel aided Jewish communities in distress in many countries. In Israel, it shares responsibility with government for select areas of social services, especially immigrant absorption and rural community development, playing a role similar to international cooperation agencies such as US-AID, UN-DP or the French technical assistance agency. Project Renewal introduced a new area for the Agency’s involvement. Both partners had considerable agreement. Nor was the Israel Government side a monolithic body, with five major government offices involved, and only a modestly powerful coordinator to orchestrate among them. Reliance on existing personnel for service delivery raised some problems of allegiance and subordination. Built-in contradictions in role definition plagued a pivotal position crucial for the project’s implementation—the Neighborhood Project Manager. Meanwhile, the Jewish Agency developed a special institutional structure of its own for planning, budgeting and evaluation. To some extent, it dipped into service delivery as well.

Had these problems with the institutional structure gone unmitigated, it is doubtful that the project would have succeeded as much as it did. However, there were several forces that helped to smooth out some of the friction in the institutional machinery. First, commitment, that \textit{sine qua non} for successful implementation (Bardach, 1977:268; Sabatier and Mazmanian, 1981), was available in high doses among the central decision makers on both sides of the marriage. Apparently, they succeeded in instilling it in many field personnel as well. Second, it turned out that the special institutional setup of the Jewish Agency allowed it to act as a powerful engine pulling the project along and supporting innovation. The Agency’s Project Renewal Department was a brand new institution without ossified modes of operation in urban neighborhoods, and with an especially high level of commitment to the project derived from a web of financial and political obligations. The Agency could thus afford to encourage innovation. Third, the project’s unique structure of twinning with Jewish communities abroad provided a source of volunteer professionals interested in the project’s success who often served as watchdogs to oversee implementation.

\textbf{Decentralization of Authority to the Neighborhood Level}

One of the major innovations introduced by the project was the delegation of responsibility for decision making to the Neighborhood Steering Committees. This principle was fulfilled, though in a manner wrought with compromises, expressed even in the very structure of these committees: half of the 22 members were residents, but the
other half were representatives of each of the relevant central government offices, the Jewish Agency, and the local government. The rules about the division of labor between the central and neighborhood levels were never formally articulated, but our findings showed that the delegation of authority was viewed by the central agencies, and by most of the neighborhoods, as being limited to determining the desired programs (planning decision). Notions of empowerment expressed through responsibility over budgets and service delivery, found in some other countries (Susskind and Elliot, 1983), were quite alien to the decision makers. Decentralization was rarely expressed as devolution. It was a combination of delegation of authority over planning decisions, together with deconcentration that brought government officials to the neighborhoods. This combination is typical of decentralization programs in developing countries (Howe, 1987).

Yet one must conclude that, relative to the base line from which decentralization started out, Israel is one of the most centralized countries in the West today. In education, housing, health, welfare, and the status of local governments, decentralization in Project Renewal has been a qualified success. This conclusion is also supported by evidence about difficulties encountered by decentralization programs in other countries.4

In a country where neighborhood organizations were minimal and neighborhood planning a rarity, Project Renewal was the first multi-agency social program to call for decentralization on a large scale. Although modest trends of geographic decentralization have been taking place recently (Gradus, 1984), and last decade saw a reform in the electoral process for mayors that freed them from control by the national parties, administrative decentralization has not been a priority issue. These exceptions have done little to empower poor residents, for whom dependence on inaccessible officials of central government is not just a theoretical notion—it is a reality of daily life.

It is likely that decentralization through Project Renewal has made a permanent dent in the previously centralized mode of service delivery to poor neighborhoods, though its extent cannot yet be gauged. There are cases where the organizational structure of the project has been copied, as if "naturally," in non-project neighborhoods. Some changes have also been observed in the manner of service delivery in housing (Carmon and Oxman, 1986) and in such notoriously inhospitable areas as building permitting.

Maintaining Good Relations With Local Governments

Project Renewal's official guidelines called for securing the goodwill of local governments on which the project depended for delivering some of its programs. Yet a look at the project's institutional structure indicates that, ostensibly, local authorities had little
to gain. Decentralization called for working directly with neighborhood residents and thus largely bypassing local governments, except for their representation on the neighborhood steering committees. By turning municipalities into service delivery agents without much authority and by introducing greater central involvement in several areas that previously were fully under local control, the project was in danger of further weakening Israel’s already-feeble local governments.

However, the real test is in the balance of interests created. On balance, the score for local governments was positive. The best indicator is the strong pressures placed by towns wishing to be included in the project, and the rarity of requests to be excluded. The opportunity for municipalities to have larger budgets pass through their coffers, thus enabling some funds from existing services to be freed up (contrary to declared Project policy), and the possibility of showing politically-marketable improvements in the community, were apparently ample compensation for some loss of control. The results were that in most of the sample neighborhoods, a reasonably good working relationship was secured with the local government, even though particular local officials at times felt bypassed.

The project also contained the seeds of an alternative model for central-local cooperation. The neighborhood steering committees created a structure for ongoing dialogue between central government offices and local government over the planning and delivery of central government services. Previously, the interchange was dependent largely on lobbying by the mayor, or on exchanges among low-level bureaucrats or professionals within each service area separately. It is as yet difficult to assess to what extent this precedent is likely to persevere without the project’s auspices.

Creating an Effective Neighborhood Planning Process for Designing a Package of Programs

The project’s goals were to pull the neighborhoods out of the syndrome of poverty, but each neighborhood had a somewhat different profile of problems. Successful implementation of the national project goals thus hinged on success in designing a suitable strategy for each neighborhood, i.e., on the adequacy of local planning. This was no easy task, considering that existing social programs have for a long time sought to improve poor neighborhoods in their separate ways. The planning process thus had to be different to make a difference. It had to reflect some comprehensive view of the problems and to tackle the wicked problems that have previously eluded solution. The planning task was assigned to the neighborhood steering committees.

Comparison of the packages of programs requested by each steering committee with the neighborhood’s central problems indicates that the majority of the programs, especially in the areas of housing
quality and crowding, infrastructure, community organization, welfare, and to some extent educational enrichment, did address problems of priority. However, there were also many programs that dealt with "cosmetics" or non-priority subjects such as cultural services, miscellaneous purchase of equipment, and educational programs with unknown benefits. In the absence of employment retraining or economic development as part of the project, and with little substantive change in the education system, few programs attempted to tackle root problems of poverty.

In all the sample neighborhoods, the planning process did get its act together and produced the requisite annual decisions. Yet in most neighborhoods it was lacking in many ways: a poor data base on the extent of problems; a tendency for early closure of the possibility of adding programs or terminating unsuccessful ones; inadequate attention to considering alternatives systematically; and an insufficient attempt to take a comprehensive view of the neighborhood's problems in order to identify priorities and levers for change.

However, it is not easy to pronounce judgment on whether the planning process was a positive link in the implementation-to-outputs-to-outcomes process. Ideal planning processes are hard to come by anywhere, as theories of planning have long recognized (Hudson, 1979; Alexander, 1984). The project's achievement was that it succeeded in institutionalizing a planning process at the neighborhood level for the first time in Israel. Long-term positive effects of this innovation lie ahead if local governments use this precedent to improve neighborhood planning. The bottom line is that the neighborhood planning process in Project Renewal is responsible for both the good shots and the missed ones in finding solutions to the neighborhoods' problems.

Adequate Inter-agency Coordination to Enable Integrated Action

Presumably, the difference between Project Renewal and ongoing social and housing services was to hinge on success in creating an integrated program—a concerted onslaught on the social, educational, health and physical problems. That meant that government offices would have to overcome their tendency toward separate action, and learn to coordinate. The solution of an ad-hoc committee or officer previously tried in Israel for coordination of particular programs or regions (with limited success) would not do for Project Renewal which required long-term coordination in a large number of neighborhoods spread all over the country. Of all the project's operational principles, this one required the greatest departure from existing behavior.

Instead of coordinated action, in many neighborhoods the project achieved only concurrent action. Weak coordination was more apparent between the two major sectors of activity, the social and the physical, than within each one. For example, coordination among social and
educational programs was somewhat better than between social programs and housing.

But on the positive side there were notable attempts to create (from scratch) norms of cooperation in the field among service delivery personnel. Most significantly, the project's organizational structure supplied a forum for eight or nine government and quasi-government agencies to sit together on a routine basis, to focus jointly on a particular neighborhood, and to go through a decision process, at least formally, that required them to determine an agreed-upon set of programs. Better coordination would have made the project's implementation process more effective, but this may not have been feasible. Nevertheless, the organizational precedent in Project Renewal could serve as a model of an improved format for coordinating government services.

Ensuring That the Project Would Add Services  
Rather than Substitute for Existing Ones

One of the things that often happens in the black box is a game of tug-of-war that pulls the implementation process in unplanned directions (Bardach, 1977). Where a program has budgets and is perceived as a success, this process may take the form of an attempt by stakeholders to substitute some of the new program's funds for their own, shifting the latter to other purposes or sites.

To what extent did project renewal actually add to existing services rather than simply change their budgetary address? This is a tough question methodologically because it must deal with second-guessing. This issue, popularly called in the project's jargon "budgetary escape," was one of the most sensitive administrative questions, of which neighborhood residents and bureaucrats alike were keenly, but incorrectly, aware. The method we developed indicated that about 40 percent of the programs had partial or full substitutions, but the funds involved were considerably smaller than this proportion (exact figures could not be calculated). Contrary to popular lore, local authorities were not the only, nor the major, culprits: government bureaus undertook internal substitution as well.

Substitution weakened the net outputs of the project, but was not large enough to jeopardize the causal connection between project-financed programs and their possible outcomes. Some substitution is inevitable in any program with budgets, political support, and a large number of institutional participants. The substitution that occurred could thus be regarded as an indicator that Project Renewal was perceived as a bandwagon worth jumping upon. However, we found insufficient awareness among decision makers of the actual characteristics of substitution, and no attempt to articulate a preventive policy.
THE LOOK INTO THE BLACK BOX

What does the look into the implementation box indicate? If judged solely as the link between planning and outcomes, the implementation process was a qualified success—a freely-pouring sieve, but with some plugged-up pores. The shortcomings in the neighborhood-based planning processes and inter-agency coordination, and the partial substitution for existing services, partially weakened the project’s capacity to achieve its goals. Thus, not all ostensible outcomes can be attributed to the project: some, probably a minority, are the result of pre-existing programs, either continued as before, or financed with substituted project funds. Other observed changes are the result of general social and economic processes occurring in Israeli society, which the project both reflected, and rode (see Carmon in this volume). At the same time, Project Renewal did deliver an impressive array of net-addition services (see Alterman and Frenkel, 1985). The analysis of the implementation process indicates that the social and physical changes that these brought on may indeed be credited to the project.

The implementation process can also be judged as an object of change in its own right. One of the factors proposed by Sabatier and Mazmanian (1981) for assessing success in implementation is the degree of behavioral change entailed. If one takes into account the major changes in administrative structures and norms that the project’s implementation necessitated, it can be judged a success. For residents of poor neighborhoods who are more dependent on government services than other parts of the population, greater accessibility of government through decentralization and public participation, better coordination among central and local government agencies, and the establishment of a precedent for neighborhood-level planning can all be counted as substantive outcomes. And that is something to write home about.

NOTES

1. For further details about the project’s goals and format see Carmon and Hill (1984) and Alterman, Carmon and Hill (1985).

2. Project Renewal has multiple goals, covering many separate areas normally the domain of distinct social programs. While a declaration of goals was made at the outset, they were phrased in very general terms. The operational goals were largely unstated and evolved with time. Many of the problems that the program seeks to tackle are indeed “wicked” ones, some perhaps intractable. After all, most of these neighborhoods did not start off in
distress; their current state reflects processes in Israeli society and economy that are not easily reversed. The program caters to a relatively broad variety of populations, some with conflicting interests: the neighborhoods are not uniform in population composition either internally (there is usually some mixture of social class, ethnic groups and degrees of religiosity) or across neighborhoods (some are poverty areas within larger cities, others are located in development towns that often differ from each other in population composition). Finally, Project Renewal, being dependent on a whole battery of government institutions, did require institutional change and even innovation to carry it out. In view of the dependency of poor residents on government services and the bear hug these sometimes supply, long-term changes achieved in some administrative modes may indeed be regarded as achievements of a substantive goal toward greater empowerment. They may also help to prevent "institutional relapse" in the future.

3. For the full discussion of the methods of analysis and the findings for each of these six principles, see Alterman with Hill, 1985.


5. In each neighborhood, each of the programs carried out was classified as outright substitution for an existing program with little change (a minority of cases), partial substitution, and full addition. A major conceptual problem concerned those programs which were not actually in existence when the project entered the neighborhood, but which would have likely been added in the "normal" course of events as they have in non-project neighborhoods. These were classified based on a judgment of probabilities. It was not possible to analyze actual budgets due to difficulties in following the accounting arising from inflation and budget transfers. See Alterman with Hill, 1985, Part 7.
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