Substantial New Monies Into National Orientation & Mobility Services Development: The Game and Play of Public Policy Implementation

Sue Silveira and Mike Steer

This brief paper will explain some of the ways that disability policy implementation works. It will reveal and examine several of the strategies that have been traditionally employed by those with vested interests (key stakeholders) to subvert policy implementation processes to their own ends whenever new ideas or new public monies arrive in the disability field.

For some 25 years the second author worked in Canada, the USA and Australia in a variety of positions having to do with the formulation and implementation of public disability policy. For example, he was for five exciting years Director and Consultant for Mental Retardation (since Intellectual Disability) Services for the Government of Newfoundland and Labrador in Canada, following this with some years as Director of the Victorian Government's Educational Integration Unit, then Principal Disability Policy Advisor for Community Services Victoria, followed by a number of years as Director of the NSW Office on Disability in the State Government's Social Policy Directorate

From lengthy experience in the musty heights of various provincial and state bureaucracies, several "truths" have been revealed to him, generally at moments of crisis, and these are as follows:

- It was always very difficult to design public policies that look good on paper;

- It was even harder to frame them in words and catch-phrases that sounded pleasing to his political masters; and

- It *is* incredibly difficult to implement policies in ways that please almost anyone, including those targeted as the primary beneficiaries.

These revelations possibly result because governmental policies are likely to be as complex as the society upon which, and through which they have been designed to work. A single government policy relating to people with mobility impairment for example, may involve the complex and interrelated activities of several Commonwealth departments, several state government departments and a number of local governments.

In NSW alone at the state level, there are almost 150 government agencies, at least

130 of which are required under section 9 of the NSW Disability Services Act to produce formal disability plans. A recently adopted government policy might also involve private organisations, for example the Vision Australia, the Deaf Society or the Royal Institute for Deaf & Blind Children or the state's Guide Dogs Association. Such professional organisations as South Pacific Educators in Vision Impairment, the Australian Braille Authority, and such special interest groups as NSW Institute for Family Advocacy might all have a role to play or decide that they had something to contribute. As well as these, specific individuals might be involved as customers, or consumers.

The question of how best to control, or plan for these multiple interests in the policy implementation process is at the heart of the challenge that has become universally known in the private and public human service sectors as the "implementation *problem*". This brief paper offers the reader an opportunity to reflect on the challenges and possibilities in a hypothesised orientation and mobility (O&M)-related policy implementation process.

Setting the scene

Orientation and mobility service delivery in our country has traditionally been the prerogative of highly reputable state-based and home state-focused charitable organisations. Imagine then, a scenario in which the Commonwealth and State Government Ministers have been persuaded by a vocal group of consumer advocates, the Australian Blindness Forum and National Disability Services (NDS) in Canberra to allocate $20million over three years into the development of a *national* comprehensive, coordinated, community based service system for people who are deemed to have orientation and mobility needs. The dream of some of those attending the last several state and national O&M conferences would seem to have come true. But what would happen after the policy announcement?

Essentially, someone to whom authority has been delegated will have to do some planning about how, where and when the money will be spent. The challenge will essentially involve assembling and implementing some form of distributive program through an appropriate mechanism or process. What is needed at the initial stage of this new and exciting project will be analogous to an architect's blueprint. The necessary plan can be assembled either from scratch or by overhauling and supplementing an existing mechanism. Implementation will mean aggregating and assembling elements and putting the implementation machine together, then making it run so that the allocated monies will flow to the beneficiaries. Hopefully, these will be people with O&M needs and their families. For those whose responsibility it is to deliver the new program, the challenges will mostly be about exerting and maintaining control of the processes they have devised.

The several parts of the implementation 'machine' will consist of some or all of the following:

- An administrative and financial control locus or loci;
- Identification of presumptive beneficiaries;
- Private providers of related O&M-related goods and services, for example,

housing, work, educational, health services;

- Professionals, developers, perhaps land holders;
- Clearances by public regulatory authorities;
- Innovations in program and design;
- Other funding sources;
- Trouble shooters;
- Political support to protect and sustain the projects as they develop.

Most of those involved in the numerous and diverse elements that together make up the O&M services implementation project will be relatively independent of one another. Their politics can generally be assumed to be initially highly defensive. They will each want "a cut of the benefits pie". However, some will want to avoid scrutiny for a variety of reasons; some will want to avoid responsibility and all will seek to avoid blame should anything go wrong. It is essential therefore, that whoever holds the authority for implementing the new policy should have a clear conception of the integration processes that are necessary, before specifying the problems that might result from them. And before speculating about what might have to be done about the hypothesised problems.

Viewed from this perspective, implementation of the exciting new O&M development program might be conceived as a playing field on which numerous political and bureaucratic games are played. The implementation process, involving the assembly of a variety of elements, together required to produce some particularly desirable outcomes, involves therefore, playing out a number of loosely inter-related games whereby certain elements are withheld from, or delivered to the program assembly process on particular terms.

The new project as a system of games

The most successful participants involved in implementation will tend to see the process as a game, rather like chess, checkers or Japanese Go. Their motivation is to be winners. The games are characterised by a need to manoeuvre large numbers of semi-autonomous actors or participants. Each of these will be trying to gain access to certain desired program elements that are not under his or her control, while at the same time trying to extract better terms from other players who are seeking to access elements that s/he controls.

Further, most or all program assembly processes generally take much longer than their sponsors hope or expect they will. Delays can result from such management games as "stalling", "thwarting" and "postponing". Delay is perhaps endemic to program implementation. It occurs, for example through the extra time needed to find suitable service providers. This might particularly be the case with regard to O&M service provision. It might occur through the time it takes for potential providers to decide on the terms they require before committing to the project. Delays in project implementation most often occur from queuing problems, i.e., from the sheer number of transactions that are necessary to make the project flow.

Manoeuvres by several players in the implementation game can both express conflict and create it. Moreover, with every counter-move aimed at reducing conflict,

there is a risk of actually making things worse. In fact, much of the implementation process for the O&M project will move along, out of control, driven by complex forces not of any party's making. There will be delay from protracted and frustrating negotiation, from unplanned and accidental occurrences, blocking delays, adoption of alternative time priorities and the seemingly inevitable illogicality of collective action. The delays themselves will cause actors to renege on commitments.

The games people play

Project managers who are held politically accountable for the success of the new policy initiative are obliged to cope. To do so they will have to play management games. Typical of these sorts of activities are "tokenism" and "monopoly" games.

- *The Tokenism Game* involves attempting to appear to be contributing to the implementation process publicly, while conceding only a small contribution. The essential management tool is procrastination. Another ploy is to substitute an inferior quality contribution, for example; "we can't arrange appropriately subsidised and trained carers, but we can easily and quickly arrange...(a less costly and far less effective alternative). However, tokenism often requires persistence and ingenuity, so that many managers seek to avoid it as a games strategy, since it is time and energy consuming.
- *The Monopoly Game.* The tokenism game is often played by monopolies whose will is enforced either by political protection or by government agency protection. Unions and certain large

service provider institutions fall into this category of player, combining political protection with formidable political strength. In some ways, with regard to the implementation game, monopolies are rather like huge whirlpools that suck all opposition into their depths. They have the capacity to create enormous disruption in the policy and program implementation process.

A variety of other games will be identifiable in the new O&M services implementation process, some well-hidden (covert), some played on the open playing field (overt). These games will include some or all the following sorts:

- *Energy Dissipation games.* These result in substantial implementation delays as individuals, organisations and other stake-holders waste large amounts of energy in the following ways:

  (a) By trying to avoid responsibility;

  (b) By defending themselves against the games of others;

  (c) By trying to set up advantageous situations.

- *The Tenacity Game.* This is a game that everyone can play. It involves stymieing the progress or completion of a particular program until your own terms are satisfied. Often as a result of player tenacity, project death or delay is the consequence. The message to those charged with O&M services project implementation is that the risks and costs of altering the potential benefits of the project from its generally accepted objectives will require careful consideration before engaging in these sorts of activities.

- *The Territory Game.* The acquisition of new territory is a game played by all bureaucratic organisations and it can often have positive results as long as no one really wins and as long as the tensions that are created generate information leading to evaluation. Competition for territory can have adverse effects if it interferes with operational responsibilities that ought to be coordinated.

- *The "Not Our Problem" Game.* The desire for expanded territory and augmented budgets rapidly evaporates when organisations realise that a particular implementation problem will impose a heavy workload or launch them into the realms of controversy or blame, or that the required tasks are too difficult and they lack the capacity to successfully undertake them. The solution is to *shift the problem.* If nobody wants the problem area, the regulatory activities that arise from it are simply not performed and the users or customers start to get the "run around".

- *The "Their Fault" Game.* This is a more aggressive form of the "not our problem" game in which blame for failure is deflected by finding a scapegoat. A particular feature of the game is that the numbers of players who can be drawn into it affects its outcomes. The more actors who can be persuaded to play the game the less likely is program completion. The greater the number of delays generated, the less likely is the project or program to succeed if completed.

- *The Odd Man Out Game.* This is a game played by relatively autonomous players once they have weighed-up the playing field and made decisions about their contribution to the implementation process. These organisational leaders or individuals are generally uncertain about the actions of the other players. As the policy initiative implementation process develops and expands, their uncertainty is either reduced or magnified and this creates or maintains options for some of them to "cut their losses" and withdraw. As the several actors continue to monitor what is going on, they simultaneously attempt to manoeuvre the other players into foregoing their options. If the uncertainties are large enough, none of the players will be willing to make the early moves and the program will not get off the ground.

- *The Resource Diversion Game.* Some of the implementation games that have adverse effects on the program assembly process include the following:

  (a) Diversion of money (resources) that ought to be used to obtain or create some of the program elements,

  (b) Deflection of the policy goals stipulated in the original mandate,

  (c) Resistance to all efforts to control behaviour administratively; and

  (d) Dissipation of personal and political energies in games playing that might otherwise be channelled into constructive program actions.

- *The Easy Money Game.* This is a game often played by parties in the private sector who wish to make off with Government monies in exchange for program elements of too little value. Their activities are not invariably illegal.

Sometimes they arise from unclear agreements about what should happen. Sometimes Easy Money games take the form of bilateral monopoly games that have one round of play. Sometimes, a great deal of time and effort is wasted in games that involve continued liaison with all the affected public agencies and political authorities. The Americans call these behaviours "boondoggles". On the darker side of these games one can find abuses of public trust, graft, kickbacks, bribes and vertically integrated monopolies. A classic example of this sort of game might involve doctors who accept fees from private patients, who then place the patients in the nursing homes they (the doctors) own and receive pharmacy kickbacks from the monopolies they create.

• *The Goal Deflection Game.* Typically the goals in the original policy mandate's implementation processes will change over time to accommodate changes in time, environment and player turnover. These shifts are particularly problematic when the original goals are ambiguous or when problems have been initially ill defined and understood, or in instances where there has been weak consensus among key players. Additionally, those with interests opposed to the project's original goals might have stayed quiet during the initial phases of implementation, and have been waiting for an opportunity to have their way. A policy of renegotiating goals can lead to trimming them back, as well as distorting or preventing their attainment. As project goals become redundant, they are added to the unsupportable political burden of the project and become a danger to its continuance.

• *The Easy Life Game.* This is a game generally played by public servants who tailor the environment to suit themselves. This is a particularly easy end to accomplish when services involve rationing. Rationing leads to queueing which results in a relatively powerless, voiceless and disorganised public. The Easy Life game is best played with reorganisation, restructure and incessant transition as its strategies.

• *The Pork Barrel Game.* Because the political process expands the boundaries of eligibility for benefits from most projects, and because Government needs support from as many sources as possible, there is always an attempt at spreading resources. Pork barrelling is the process that ensures that ones friends, relatives and mates benefit from what is within one's hands to give. For example, representatives of "the powerless poor" or the "disabled minority" concentrate on securing payments for themselves and positions of influence for their family and friends. This phenomenon generates as well as results in "patronage".

• *The Piling-on Game.* This is a game in which the initial successes of a project or a new program provide the potential for longer-run debilitation. The new program is in fact seen primarily as a new political resource, and all the players "pile-on" to the band wagon, until the wheels collapse and the program founders, having run its course to the benefit of the few who jumped on early.

- *Budget Games*. These generally take the form of budget maximisation activities in which implementation success depends on shaping incentives for those who control the budgets. Some games take the form of "ready-to-go, must "move the money" strategies. Others involve inflating the costs of goal attainment by "padding". In others the designers provide few incentives for the resource donors to police spending. In others there are difficulties in specifying quantifiable indicators. In general terms, the older a money-moving agency grows, the less adventurous and ideological it becomes.

- *The Up-for-Grabs Game*. Sometimes a new policy or program mandate provides elements, for example, a piece of bureaucracy with a modest budget, without actually prescribing or envisioning its purpose or its connection to other elements of the system. These few unambiguous elements are "up-for-grabs" to be shaped to whatever ends generate the most gains for the "grabber".

- *The Keeping the Peace Game*. Some social programs and policies originate from a desire to "do the right thing" and extirpate a real or imagined evil. The arenas on which these games are played are generally replete with players who are hotheads, zealots or extremists. Actors are sometimes intent on sparking a counter-reformation, or on intense scrutiny, or on criticising or even terrorising. The goal for the senior manager or project executive in these circumstances is to "keep the lid on" the implementation process, while those with special agendas attempt to capture the program. This they do by, for example, offering to write the program guidelines or regulations.

Advice to program managers and policy advisers

Policy and program implementation, with regard to the $20 million new O&M services development initiative that provides the "playing field" for some or all of the games outlined above, should the advocacy groups and NDS dream come true, would almost certainly result in a display of pressure politics. Those involved in the process should expect to either observe or participate in an ongoing series of bargaining, manoeuvring and pulling and pushing as the policy adoption process spills over into actual implementation.

In all the "jockeying" the die-hards who believe they have in some way lost out, will seek, when the guidelines and regulations are being drafted, to continue their opposition. The entire project implementation process can be conceived as a system of pressures, with delay as an endemic characteristic.

With regard to the administrative processes that are essential to all forms of policy and project implementation, managers and advisers should expect to encounter a variety of forms of "authority leakage" because individual agency officials will have varying goals and use their discretion in translating orders. Further, the dynamics of organisational recruitment often create conservative middle managers and often, the lower staff echelons within agencies have autonomous power bases.

Implementation of the new O&M policies and programs will be driven by inter-organisational transactions with government officials, clients, private contractors,

professional groups and publicists, all articulating their own special fears and anxieties. Successful implementation depends to a large extent on the "massing of assent" from those who are key stakeholders.

There are a great many issues arising from the various games described above, that touch upon the recurrent theme of the particularity of human service organisations. For example, such issues as rapidity of change and the large amount of external determination of change; the value dimension, for example, the issue of legitimacy, and aspects reflected by differing attitudes.

The reader can be quite sure that the creation and introduction of new forms of O&M service to Australians who are blind or vision impaired will involve, for better or worse, compromise on most important issues. Most importantly, it is essential for all key players in such an undertaking to remain optimistic and retain the primacy of having goals that will ultimately benefit people who require O&M skills.

Ideas in this article are based on Eugene Bardach's (1977) timeless classic *The implementation game: What happens after a bill becomes law.*

Sue Silveira, M.HSc.Ed., Dip.App.Sc (Orth)., *JAFF Research Fellow, RIDBC Renwick Centre, University of Newcastle, Australia; e-mail: <sue.silveira@ridbc.org.au>.* *Mike Steer Ph.D., AM.,* *Senior Lecturer, Vision Impairment, RIDBC Renwick Centre, University of Newcastle, Australia; e-mail: <mike.steer@ridbc.org.au>.*