RAND EUROPE

MEASURING THE CAPACITY OF GOVERNMENT TO DELIVER POLICY

It seems obvious that better implementation of policy results in better policy outcomes. Yet the capacity of government to deliver programmes is often not assessed. RAND Europe proposes a way to conceptualise and measure this capacity.

WHY MEASURE CAPACITY?

The capacity of government to design and deliver policy matters a great deal to the success of a policy. This seems like an obvious statement. Nonetheless, policymakers do not always emphasise the capacity of public administration to deliver the policy that is introduced. For instance, the US Government's failure to supply an effective platform to process health insurance claims, while implementing the policy to expand insurance coverage, is a good example of a lack of alignment between policy and capacity. There may be good reasons for this. Capacity-building can be messy for policymakers. It takes time and often requires policymakers to tackle difficult issues such as organisational change, use of information technology and workforce management. Little is known about the models of capacity-building and their effectiveness. Different countries have different trajectories of capacity-building, given their national administrative traditions, reform programmes and institutional and policy contexts. Some countries have relied more explicitly on improving public sector organisations; others have outsourced aspects of service delivery; some have looked at public–private or third-sector partnerships to deliver services; and many have attempted a mix of approaches.

RAND Europe has undertaken a range of projects that aim to better understand the capacity of public administration. Our view is that capacity-building in public administration often needs to be seen as a strategic objective in and by itself. This observation is confirmed through reported international experience in managing reform programmes.

WHAT TO MEASURE

Our approach has been to conceptualise successful performance based on those capacities exhibited by public sector organisations that have delivered successful programmes and reforms. Our work with the OECD indicates that public sector organisations that have been successful in implementing programmes have a range of capacities supportive of implementing and sustaining reform. The capacities demonstrated by such an organisation include both a focus on internal processes and also, crucially, on: assessing its performance, developing its staff and wider stakeholders, identifying upcoming challenges and adapting to users' needs.

Hence, these high-performing organisations are focusing not only on the outputs of their activities, but also on: results shared across the public sector, civil society and citizens, access to public services, voice of citizens in delivering services and more choice in public service delivery.

These capacities can be grouped into six basic categories, as shown in the box overleaf. This categorisation is based on several capacity assessment frameworks used by RAND Europe in recent years, including proprietary work with the European Commission to assess the capacities of DG Employment and Social Inclusion and DG Public Health and Consumer Protection, and work for the OECD SIGMA agenda on modernising the civil service in Central and Eastern Europe and the Western Balkans.

SIX TYPES OF ORGANISATIONAL CAPACITY

1. Clear strategic direction over time, which focuses on the essence of the reform
2. Organisational structure that supports the objectives
3. Fair and transparent human resources practices
4. Organisational skills
5. Organisational culture
6. Effective accountability relationships

To expand on the list, the first category looks at the capacity of an organisation to undertake strategic planning in relation to its mission and objectives, focusing on the clarity of objectives and mission, and the resources needed to support planning and performance measurement. The strength of the organisational structure includes such elements as coordination between units, clarity of institutional mandates and management of external relations such as with service users. The human resources category assesses whether the organisation recruits the right people, rewards good performance and applies rules consistently. The organisational skills category looks at whether staff have the right skills and training to succeed in meeting the organisational objectives. Organisational culture looks at shared values, practices and beliefs. Finally, accountability relationships focus on the oversight and guidance relationships that exist between public sector entities.

HOW TO MEASURE CAPACITY

RAND Europe advocates the use of a variety of methods to ascertain the capacity of government to deliver policy. An effective diagnostic tool is a survey of those working in public sector organisations. RAND Europe has used a number of online staff surveys that asked the respondents to indicate the level of agreement or disagreement with a series of statements.

We would also recommend gauging the perceptions of stakeholders, such as those who implement the policy on the ground, and service users, to achieve a broad perspective on capacity. In Table 1, we provide an overview of how key research questions link to organisational capacities and the methods for collecting data.

CONCLUSION

Public sector organisations are continually asked to innovate, implement complex programmes and anticipate user needs. Having better knowledge of the capacity of those implementing policies gives crucial information on the likely success of an initiative in a specific policy context.

Table 1: Data collection for capacity measurement

Main research question	Core capacities	Related data collection
Do those in public sector organisations understand what is required of them and do they execute their responsibilities properly?	• Clear strategic direction • Organisational structure	• Staff survey • Interviews with stakeholders • Interviews with those delivering policy on the ground; survey of service users
Are public sector organisations delivering what they are required to deliver? And is the delivery of these services performed at a level necessary for the system as a whole to function as intended?	• Human resources practice • Organisational skills • Supportive organisational culture • Effective accountability relationships	• Document review • International comparison • Staff survey • Interviews with stakeholders • Interviews with those delivering policy on the ground; survey of service users

WANT TO LEARN MORE?

RAND Europe's work on measuring capacity is described on our website (www.randeurope.org/govcap) where we also recommend further reading on this topic.

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