

Effectiveness In Government: The Theory Of Intentional Action In A Comparative Perspective

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ABSTRACT:

This article comparatively evaluates major theories on the issue of effectiveness in government. Having criticized the theories of people's satisfaction, relativity, systems and goal-attainment, the article presents the theory of voluntary-intentional action as a more consistent approach to explain government effectiveness. The general theory of intentional action and application of the general theory to government have been reviewed in this respect. The article ends with a comparison between the theory of intentional action and other theories.

1. Introduction

Alongside the question of legitimacy, effectiveness has always been one of the most important problems about the nature of government throughout history. The question of legitimacy is actually about the rational justification of carrying out the rules issued by government departments, since government without rule is meaningless. Nevertheless, if the basis of justification is reasonable, then actions of government will be fair, just, and rational. What is meant by a rational justification is a proof that the government is "rightful". The second question is about effectiveness: is each one of the various actions of the government rational or not? There may be legitimate governments whose actions are not right, and there may also be governments that are entirely illegitimate but whose works are appropriate. The issue of effectiveness is the object of inquiry in this article.

An appropriate approach to deal with this question is the Theory of Intentional Action, a new version of what March (1992) calls "the theory of rational voluntary action and exchange". In simple terms, The Theory of Intentional Action is summarised in the following proposition: "human beings who follow rational procedures will maximise their own achievement, that those who fail to behave in such a way will be eliminated by process of competition, and that, as a result, the behaviours we will observe will be those that a theory of rational action would predict. Behaviour consistent with such fundamentals is presumed to lead inexorably to outcomes that are uniquely determined by, and thus predictable from, exogenous conditions of exchange, such as the distribution of resources and preferences" (Golembiewski, 1996: 139). This conceptual view has still been in force among the scholars of a wide spectrum, such as sociology, government, public administration, and management, despite a steady rate of criticisms by managerialist scholars.

This article begins with a critique of other theories employed to explore the issue of government effectiveness. In this context, the theories of goal attainment, systems, relativity, and people's satisfaction will critically be examined. It then continues by defining and briefly explaining the general theory of intentional action as well as its application

to the issue of effectiveness in government. The concluding part presents a comparison between the Theory of Intentional Action and other theories of effectiveness in government.

2. A Critique Of Major Theories Of Effectiveness In Government

This article presents a framework for the concept of effectiveness and its major elements through the Theory of Intentional Action. However, there are other major theories which strive to shed light on the issue of effectiveness in governmental affairs. In this section, major theories of government effectiveness will be summarised in order to give the reader a chance to make a comparison between the Theory of Intentional Action and other theories.

a. The theory of goal-attainment

According to the theory of success (or the theory of goal attainment), each organisation is created to realise a particular goal (or goals), and that the assessment of the relevant effectiveness must be based on the final achievements of the involved organisation. The methods for reaching the goals are irrelevant of the question of effectiveness: it is only what finally is achieved that counts. For instance, if an organisation is commercial or production company, the goal would be maximising profits. If the military forces of a country is at war, the goal which is considered as the basis for assessing its effectiveness is defeating the enemy. Therefore, this view holds that an organisation must have clear-cut goals and be fully predetermined to achieve these goals. Moreover, there should be accurate ways of assessing the progress towards each goal. One must be careful not to assume the minor and practical goals in the daily activities of an organisation as the criteria, but rather, the essential goals of the organisation which in some ways justify the existence of that organisation are to be considered.

If the organisation under scrutiny is a government, then what would be the goal? It is important to note here that there are totally different views on this issue, depending on ideological stands. This polarisation over the issue of the goals of government provides the first ground to suggest that the theory of goal attainment alone cannot accurately explain the effectiveness of the government. For instance, Hobbes holds that there is only one goal for government: providing security in a general sense; individual security in society and protecting the national security against external intruders. In his view, one accepts sovereignty of a government for his own sake, so he can do as he pleases in the provided secure atmosphere. In the absence of this security, war will occur and its consequences will be nothing but destruction. Thus, it is only provision of security that construct the basis of effectiveness. Other goals such as reconstruction, health, education and raising moral standards are not considered in this view at all. On the other extreme, with the rise of socialist thought and welfare state in 20th century, the goals of government have augmented. In a sense, nearly everything has been perceived as being fallen into the domain of government's responsibility. A second reason why the theory of goal-

attainment cannot provide alone a satisfactory explanation for government effectiveness is the fact that the perception of the essential goals of government is usually different for government leaders and ordinary citizens.

b. The Systems Theory

The concept of system is derived from the concept of machine. It was first used by Aristo to compare the mind with a meat grinder (Larijani, 1996: 354). In this view, every system is considered to be working in a specific environment and having three major components: input, process, and output. The use of this concept has become widespread in "agent" organisations, while a major problem occurs when using the concept of system in studying those agents which act intentionally. The only time the concept of "system" is effective is when the relation between input and output is clearly defined, that is, process is clear and concrete, to the extent that when the input in any type of environment is given, the output will be as expected. However, regarding the question of intentional action, in the case of an actor or an acting organisation, the relation between input and output can no longer be predefined. In other words, the more the performers' actions are preset and predictable and the less involvement of performers' actions, the better they can be determined with the aid of a system. This is a vivid paradox and also a significant methodological flaw.

Generally, when studying an organisation through models of system simulation, the issue of its effectiveness is also considered to be made up of three components: input, process, and output. In contrast to the theory of goal-attainment which concentrates on goal and the final achievement, the output, effectiveness in systems theory is based on the power to prepare the input, the method of processing the input, the method of organising the output, and preservation of balance in the system.

According to the systems theory, an organisation's longevity is the basis for its effectiveness; that is the way the organisation obtains its essential resources, the way it safeguards itself as a collective performer, and the way it interacts with its environment. These are the elements which practically present a complex criteria for the concept of effectiveness. In addition, every system may be made up of a number of sub-systems about which the question of effectiveness also holds, in that if any of the sub-systems are not adequately effective, this will also affect the effectiveness of the whole system. Effectiveness also necessitates that the organisation be properly conscious of its environment and can interact with effective factors appropriately. In short, according to the systems theory, government effectiveness is measured on the basis of the elements of a system: environment, input, process, and output. The inputs of government are the means and resources at government's disposal, such as citizens, government employees, and financial resources. The government should be able to come up with proper decrees and implement them by the aid of the resources at her disposal. The outputs will be, then, all the actions of government, and the goods and services produced at the end. The environmental factors would affect this process both positively or adversely.

The major shortcoming of the systems theory is that output cannot be used independently as a basis for assessing effectiveness. Rather, along with the system's output, the purposes and goals such as establishing law and order, economic management, and defence, should also be taken into account.

c. The Theory of People's Satisfaction (TPS)

TPS suggests that the only effective government is one which meets the requirements of its citizens. Therefore, the degree of government effectiveness is proportionate to the amount of their satisfaction. Liberal democratic governments consider people's views toward their government to be vital. Thus, according to TPS, the most effective government is the one with which the citizens are most satisfied. However, this theory has a number of shortcomings.

Firstly, there are still governments whose main supports are some particular elite or a selected group of people, so that effectiveness is taken by such governments to be determined by the degree of approval from this elite.

Secondly, in practice, it is difficult to measure the satisfaction of the citizens, and shortcomings are interpreted differently, since it is nearly impossible to survey people's opinion on every issue. Even if surveys were undertaken, what percentage would be considered as the minimum required to regard the people's view as positive? Of course it is illogical to expect a consensus on every issue.

Thirdly, the concept of the majority of votes is controversial, in that there is the danger of exaggerating the opinion of majority and throwing the opinion of minority into unimportance. One practical solution is that, in those governments in which people participate in elections, people's vote is a display of their support for candidates and their views, or vice versa. Therefore, there is no need to seek citizens' votes for every case.

Lastly, in certain cases, citizens are neither familiar with details of the government's action nor are they interested in them, they merely look at outcomes. Therefore, effectiveness according to TPS actually concentrates on outcomes, while none can fully control or guarantee outcomes of a certain policy or set of actions.

d. The Theory of the Relativity of Effectiveness

This theory perceives that there is no single standard for the concept and degree of effectiveness. Many assessments of effectiveness are little more than a reflection of the assessor's personal view instead of being real assessments. Therefore, effectiveness should be considered as a matter of value judgments. This considerably limits the grounds for the evaluation of effectiveness in government.

3. Voluntary-Intentional -Rational Action: A More Consistent Approach For A Better Exploration Of Government Effectiveness

The basis of effectiveness of a government lies in its nature of being an actor or an agent. Just as an individual is an actor and acts of his own free will, in a collective form a government also produces voluntary actions. The issue of effectiveness regarding an actor is instantly raised whenever an actor performs an action. Of course, there are such other collective actors as private and voluntary sector organisations, and the issue of effectiveness concerns them as well. However, a government is considered to be the best collective actor and the most complete type of social order.

Effectiveness pertains to the way an actor performs an action. Thus, a government's effectiveness is pertinent to the nature of rational actions. In order to further explain this point, the next section provides a brief description for the structure of action and then determine the areas where effectiveness makes sense. In this theoretical analysis of effectiveness the concept of rationality plays a key role.

a. A brief explanation of the Theory of Intentional Action

Be it individual or group, an actor acts in a certain situation. In this context, a true situation of an action is fundamental. Situation is part of the actual world. Indeed, there is a relation between the situation in which an action occurs, the relevant action, and the actor, but not necessarily a causative one. It can be argued that there is a dialectic relation between a true situation and the related action, in that on the one hand action develops within a situation and then it is realised, and, on the other hand, the action itself produces a new situation.

The basic elements employed in this theory are triplets of the form: actor, situation, and action, which altogether constitute practical elements. Practical elements form the environment of actions, just as material elements form the material environment. There are three major components with respect to a practical element:

- (i). the actor's perception of the situation. This may be very close to reality, or may be distant from it, just like a merchant who is on the verge of bankruptcy, but has a positive perception of the situation, therefore, he commits himself to a big deal, or contrarily, a military commander, who surrenders himself and his soldiers, by assuming that he is being defeated, even though if he had decisively continued fighting, he would have triumphed.
- (ii). the desired situation which refers to a situation which an actor sets his mind and wants to take place. A desired situation is not the same as an ideal situation, since there are so many ideals which one never intends to realise.
- (iii). the protocol (or program) which is a finite series of steps which must be

taken by the agent. Among the others, the first step is unique because although it is undertaken to produce the action, the situation may alter in such a way as to cause the agent to decide to select a new desired situation as well as another protocol.

One significant point about protocols is that each task in the protocol is actually a directive which the actor must follow. For example, if someone's wallet full of cash money falls into a river, the desired situation in this case is to regain the wallet. The set of tasks which one should undertake is comprised of quickly taking his clothes off, diving into the river, getting the wallet, returning to the surface and out of the water, and putting his clothes on. As can be seen from this example, for every stage within the protocol, there is a directive which the performer should follow.

In short, understanding an intentional action requires a three-fold explanation: the perceived situation, the situation which the performer is determined to realise, and the protocol for realising the desire.

b. Application of the Theory of Intentional Action to government effectiveness

In terms of intentional actions, a government is in a more perfect state than an individual for three practical reasons: Firstly, an individual perceives a situation through his/her knowledge and data available to him / her, while there are many people involved in a government with clearly more informational/ scientific means at their disposal. Secondly, with respect to the desired situation, an individual makes decisions based on incentives and values, in a government while the desired situation may be planned through a careful process of decision making according to the government's resources and structure. Thirdly, an individual plans his protocol according to his experiences, while the various departments of the executive and planning and strategy offices in a state are capable of planning for protocol so carefully that it would comply with rules and regulations, and at the same time meets the expected objective.

Effectiveness in this study pertains to a government's way of performance in relation to the following three issues:

1. How does a government perceive the true situation with respect to each one of its actions, and what is the degree of its accuracy?
2. What are the criteria for the selection of a desired situation by a government?
3. How does a government deal with "the big questions"?

The way a government deal with these issues will determine the performance of a government in that they provide the criteria for a government's effectiveness.

The issues which relate to the effectiveness of a government must involve one of the major components of the government's action, that is, it should involve either government's perception of real situation, or the way that the desired situation takes shape, or the procedure for planning and implementing the relevant protocol. In other words, we have been able to accurately determine the domain of the issues involving effectiveness through the theory of action which has been presented here.

The above determination of the boundaries regarding the study of the system's effectiveness shows that this domain comprises a great number of issues. Although they can be classified methodically, it does not adversely affect their quantity. However, for study purposes this article will select only two subjects, namely the role of analysis and decision-making. Of course, each of the two subjects are related either to many components of actions or to various branches of the three core issues of effectiveness.

(i). The Intentional Action Theory and expertise in government

Manifestation of expertise in a government system and its role in the government's performance are an indication of effectiveness. In line with what was presented in this article as the framework of action, there are three areas of a government's activities in which the question of expertise is involved: presenting a realistic picture of the true situation for every action, expertise in planning to bring out the desired situation, and expertise in preparing and practically guiding the government's program. The next paragraphs will briefly explore the issue of having and presenting a realistic picture of the true situation for every action, since it is the heart of the matter.

In order to present a realistic picture of situations, a rational, preferably scientific, analysis is essential. Furthermore, a governance approach would be perfectly utilised in this context. Thus, the policy-makers and their advisers should have background in such fields as economics, sociology, politics, public and private management, and international relations. This would facilitate "being realistic", which means having a picture in mind which is as close as possible to the relevant true situation through harmonising different viewpoints on the problem of inquiry.

However, presenting an ever more precise picture of a true situation with respect to important issues of a government is indeed a difficult task. In this point, it is essential to elaborate on the role of information in perceiving the true situation. According to positivist approach, "the most accurate information is obtained when a researcher comes into contact with the real world, for instance, observation in natural sciences" (Larijani, 1996: 338). Indeed, in a popular and common sense a more general concept of the matter is involved as well, for instance, the possibility for one to easily reach different opinions on any single subject. The information revolution of our times has not only affected the works of experts and policy-makers, but also has had deep effects in social affairs.

Nevertheless, reaching the data could not always guarantee the true perception of events. A great volume of data which is easily available for an expert might prevent him/her from perceiving the event and consequently cause him to merely act as a "reporter" of events. Furthermore, a second and more unethical type of deception could occur: instead of discovering and presenting the events, the expert tries to influence the decision-makers, therefore, by offering statistical reports along with evidence, he, in any way, bombards the authorities' minds with data, and then tends to instill his own views in their minds. There are a number of explanations of this behaviour, such as self-interest of individuals including experts, the nature of bargains, and other personal and organisational factors. Naturally, this kind of behaviours tends to diminish government effectiveness.

(ii). The Intentional Action Theory and decision-making in government

As hitherto pointed out, the major goal of government is making decisions: "in any executive system, the decision making administration must formulate the best decision in the most rational way" (Larijani, 1996: 349). By the "best decision" at government level means a decision based on an accurate perception of the true situation and is within the framework of the national strategy or national plan and implementation such a plan made by government. The ultimate stage in this system of decision-making is not confined to bringing about the best decisions, rather the manner in which they are made is also of importance.

Having considered the three components of action, one would realise that apart from the first one in which understanding is essential, in the other two the element of decision-making is involved. The notion of decision-making with respect to government's action turns into a system, since it may go beyond an individual's circle of decision-making. Although there may be some governments in which decisions could be made as simply as if an individual were making them, the subject of inquiry in this article is the rational need for decision-making as a basis for effectiveness. There are two major issues regarding decisions: creating decisions and making decisions. In creating decisions the question of expertise plays a crucial role, while there need be other factors such as political issues and lobbying groups involved as well.

Concluding Remarks

The main source of effectiveness is not exactly clear in other theories presented above, while in the theory of intentional action which has been presented in this article, it is clearly defined in terms of the very essence of "being an agent", which is the unit under assessment. Unlike the other theories, the intentional action theory helps to identify the elements involved in effectiveness, and it is free of all those uncertainties and instabilities displayed in the aforesaid four theories. Due to their failure to consider the sources and origins of effectiveness and lack of a proper perception of its nature, scholars have

become fully confused, thus each has for totally arbitrary reasons, selected a way and method of its own. The action theory of government effectiveness gives the effect of harmony and relevance to the whole discussion of effectiveness, and meticulously and technically arranges the discussion.

It is interesting that the outstanding aspects of the other theories already exist - that is, they are not artificially gathered or categorised - in the action theory to go government effectiveness. For example, the accurate knowledge of the environment, which is a characteristic of the system theory of effectiveness, appears exactly in the same way at the stage of perceiving the true situation in action theory. The true situation includes the environment and even exceeds that stage and becomes involved with the true situation of the system itself. Similarly, regarding the desired situation, various long term and short-term goals and value aspects are involved. In analysing the action protocol, the method of employing tools and resources for work, technology, etc. is focused on and each plays its appropriate role.

Lastly, it is of importance to point out that deriving a practical approach to the assessment of effectiveness is in line with the type of organisation being analysed. The focus in this article is on the question of effectiveness in government. Government is only one organisation from among hundreds of types of organisations that is considered as a collective performer. The action theory presented here may be employed with respect to any kind of organisations. However, based on their characteristics, the organisations may be categorised, and through such categorisation one can derive practical rules and regulations which are easily applicable for a manager, an authority, or an assessment guideline. It is the same with respect to a government, that is, one may use the above framework as a general basis and then systematically examine the various branches. And based on the fundamental theory, one may analyse questions of effectiveness case by case, and develop broad and detailed practical criteria.

i TIA

ii generally known as RVA

iii social organisation

iv process

v inputs

vi e.g., a particular religious group or race

vii an individual or a an organisation such as a government

viii the more rational the actor, the more effective or more competent

ix appropriate and righteous

x righteousness

xi For the "big issues" of public administration and government, see Dubnick, 1997; Dobell, 1996; Golembiewski, 1998;

Cook, 1998; Behn, 1995; and Neumann, 1996.

xii the methodological deception of data

xiii the desired situation and the plan for action

xiv the question of tools and resources as opposed to goals

xv applied

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