

Incrementalism and Decision-Making Structure :

A General Observation in Developing Countries

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I. Introduction

Although there seems to be solid agreements among scholars on policy-making and decision-making in terms of concepts and theoretical expression, there has yet to be an attempt to suggest some heuristic viewpoints for the clarification of various forms of change took place as the results of different policies and varied decision-making structures in developing countries. However, a distinguished sociologist once remarked, "there seems to be no one decision strategy in the abstract, apart from the societal environment into which it is introduced."¹ The implication of this expression is that there should be no one decision model that is a universal valid description of the process of choice in a social and organizational setting. Instead of developing decision models in general, it has been suggested that it might be more valuable to look at decision-making as a process which varies in response to the particular societal environment.²

The model of "disjointed incrementalism" is a description of the average decision-maker's response to uncertainties due to scarce information and limitations on the predictions of outcomes.³ It also reflects the constraints on rational choice which are imposed by the intractability of values and limited aspirations.⁴ In this, its protagonist resembles Herbert Simon's "satisficer."⁵ But where Simon's model

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posits only certain general human and systemic characteristics, the incrementalist model does more. Incrementalism is a set of propositions which must, like any theory of societal planning, subsume a theory of society,⁶ and this model's theory of society makes assumptions of *stability* which of necessity limit the conditions in which it is applicable.

The explicit context of the incremental decision process is a pluralist society of well defined institutions with "prescribed functions and constraints," and a known status-quo sufficiently stable to be the datum for any policy changes.⁷ To apply the incrementalist idea to study the decision-making process in developing countries, a precautionary step should be taken into account. Because in these areas, under the impact of Western technology and new value systems, stability is a thing in the past. The cumulative effects of social mobilization⁸ and political participation⁹ are accelerating social change at a pace hitherto unknown. Not stability, then, but disorganization and change are found in developing nations and transitional societies.

Dror realized the implications of this pervasive uncertainty for the incremental decision process and listed a whole set of situations for which this model is applicable.¹⁰ These range from crises to new problems, and lead him--while accepting the usual validity of the incremental mode as a descriptive model--to boggle at its normative implications.¹¹ Etzioni also emphasizes the self-confessed limitations of incrementalism regarding "large" decisions, raising the question of what are "decisions" and what is implementation.¹²

As a conclusion, the limitations of a single description of the decision process in differing societal environments apply to any model which claims almost universal validity. Such models sometimes take the form of normative proposals

which, it is implied, also fit reality. Dror's "optimal analyst", Etzioni's "mixed scanner" cannot avoid this problem, though they can, and do, provide important insights into how the decision process might or should work.

II. Incrementalism And Development Administration: A Critique

In all developing countries, it is possible for their central government decision-makers in deciding on an expenditure program say, highways, to neglect certain outcomes, policies, or values, because fragmentation of decision-making will result in other decision-making centers, whether governmental or non-governmental, remedying the neglect if their interests are affected.¹³ This fragmentation explains the full title of the method, "disjointed incrementalism." Analysis and evaluation are disjointed in the sense that various aspects of public policy are analyzed at various points with no apparent coordination.¹⁴

At any rate, Lindblom does not rule out the use of the rational-deductive method altogether. He allows that it is applicable in some technical and administrative decision-making, where the amount of change to be effected is small and the degree of information and understanding is high. But where a small amount of change is to be effected and the decision is complex, relative to the information and understanding available, he recommends disjointed incrementalism rather than the rational-deductive method.¹⁵

In any event, Lindblom's incremental, or "muddling through" method is based largely on the premise that the decisions in question are being made in developed societies--in particular the United States. He does not associate himself with decision-making in developing countries. Another distinguished student in this field, Yekrezkel Dror, who has made some trenchant criticisms of Lindblom, and who has also produced

an elaborate decision-making model of his own, devotes an entire chapter of his important book to public policy-making in developing states.¹⁶ He is unable to accept disjointed incrementalism except as one part of his own elaborate model for policy-making. In order to raise the quality of policy-making, Dror wants a model which will be applicable and at the same time will motivate "a maximum effort to arrive at better policies."¹⁷ He strongly argues that disjointed incrementalism cannot do this, because it encourages inertia and a continuation of the status quo. It actually constitutes a barrier to the improvement of policy-making.

According to Dror, incrementalism is also an unsuitable strategy for developing countries, because, as mentioned earlier, it promotes inertia and discourages innovation. In these countries, Dror argues, marginal changes are not sufficient for achieving acceptably large improvements in policy results. The policies pursued by the administration of the Thai bureaucracy prior to the First National Economic Development Plan clearly do not constitute an adequate basis for building on through only incremental change. Thus, the main impact of Lindblom's method would be to serve as an ideological reinforcement of the pro-inertia and anti-innovation forces prevalent in all human organization, administrative and policy-making.¹⁸

Another critic has observed that "the question remains whether gradual, incremental change is only a form of adaptation which leaves basically intact what ought to be changed."¹⁹ There may be limits to incrementalism; continuing reform via a series of small steps may be blocked. Thus in planning, Hanson generalizes that the type of piecemeal social engineering "which aims at bending old institutions in new directions and mobilizing traditional motivations for non-traditional tasks would seem to offer the most promising way forward."²⁰ But this approval of disjointed incrementalism is qualified by the proviso that gradualism should not become

so gradual as to be self-defeating. Hanson also observes that where the traditional structure of thought and action "appears irremediably hostile to all useful forms of economic growth, and where the elite is endowed with exceptional power and authority, a thorough-going 'modernization' assault may be possible."²¹ A good illustration of the way in which an attempted reform proved to be relatively a failure was the attempted reform of budgeting in South Vietnam in the late 1950's, which, from the point of view of government reform as a whole, might be classified as incremental. It encountered resistance from other governmental agencies. As Professor Weidner puts it: "the budget director was eventually removed because the ultimate logic of the reforms involved government-wide change."²²

Thus far, we tend to neglect the cultural setting and values of different societies. It seems appropriate to survey more on Dror's model and the relationship between development administration scheme and the notion of incrementalism.

Dror's own model occupies seven pages in tabular form.²³ But a summery of his summery would include the following points.²⁴

At the start, there is a clarification of values, objectives, and decision-criteria, and an identification of alternatives, including consideration of new alternatives. There is then a preliminary estimation of the expected payoff of various alternatives, and decisions are made whether to follow a strategy of minimal risk or one of innovation. If the former, the disjointed incrementalism (successive limited comparison) method should be followed. If the latter, a cutoff should be established for considering possible results of alternative policies and identification of expected results. The optimum policy is the one that is agreed on by the various analysts after discussion the preceding stages. A conscious effort should be made to decide

whether the problem is important enough to make the analysis more comprehensive. Theory and experience, rationality and extrarationality are all relied on. Explicit arrangements are made to improve the quality of the policy through learning from experience, staff development and other means. In its elaboration and comprehensiveness, Dror's model seems to follow the main lines of the rational-deductive model, but with welcome concessions to practicability. However, some of the joints between the rational-deductive frame and the addition are not too smooth. It would be useful to have a little more help on how to tell exactly when incrementalism would be in order and when it would not. And the extrarational component (apparently consisting in "hunches", "intuition", "creative thinking", and so on) seems a little out of place in such a scientific setting.²⁵

In considering the appropriateness of these three methods of decision-making for developing countries, it is convenient to review, in turn, the rational-deductive approach, disjointed incrementalism, and Dror's model. At first sight, the rational-deductive method of decision-making would seem to be largely inapplicable to developing countries. The possibility of rational calculation in such countries is presumably low, *prima facie*, because one of the criteria of a country's being less developed is that it ranks low in rationality or "secularization".²⁶ To be sure, we must not be hasty in labelling developing countries as "less rational" than developed. Differences in values and in cultural conditioning may make rational calculation less easy for outsiders to identify; nevertheless, it may exist. However, understanding is likely to be low in the sense that some of the factors which might permit elaborate rational deductive calculations are almost certain to be absent. For instance, statistical information will be imperfect, and an adequate body of theory applicable to underdeveloped situations will probably be lacking.²⁷ Such deficiencies of developing

countries are also recognized by Dror. The rational components, he says, are of poor quality, and the cultural ideology within which the public policy-making system operates is not conducive to rationality. The bureaucracy is weak and cannot supply very many rational components in policy-making.²⁸ Alfred Diamant adds a new dimension to the argument, namely time. After observing that models which are uncompromisingly rationalist and maximizing in character have little relevance for developing countries because of their lack of skilled manpower, he adds that the maximizers' preoccupation with "the clock" would founder on the rocks of cultures still accustomed to cyclical time; such societies would have difficulty in projecting plans into a distant future.²⁹

Nevertheless, in spite of these unfavorable conditions, many developing countries reject incrementalism and appear to use methods resembling the rational-deductive for their policy-making.³⁰ Developing nations often declare their desire to base their aspirations on "science", and have a verbal predisposition toward planning.³¹ Motivation has actually outrun understanding, but this is concealed by exaggerating the amount of understanding which exists. Professor Hirschman agrees with this and puts his impression in the following manner:

.....urged on by pressing problems and by the desire to catch up, and liberally supplied with recipes communicated to them by the advanced countries of both East and West, their policy-makers are only too ready to believe that they have achieved full understanding and to act on the basis of this belief.³²

In this way, an illusion of innovation in policy-making is created. In Latin America particularly, there is an insistence on beginning "new" projects, and

on refusing to continue projects begun by one's predecessors.³³ In regard to local government and administration, another student thinks that "some local authorities in Latin America are dotted with buildings started by one council and left, uncompleted by the next."³⁴ No doubt, much of the impulse to reject the work of one's predecessor and to claim novelty for one's own projects reflects the personal nature of Politics in Latin America. This is also applicable to Thailand, especially at the provincial level. In several cases, the new governor would like to start his own new projects rather than to complete the ones left over by his predecessor. Leaders perception along this line has been that credit and support must be directed for personal benefit and not for the benefit of a rival or competitor. Nevertheless, a rational-deductive facade is often superimposed. When past policy-making is denounced as unsuccessful, the reason after given is that it was haft-hearted and piecemeal.³⁵ When the "recipes" from advanced countries are adopted, there is often a similar tendency to try and build anew, which sometimes results in ignoring the context of the culture, thus producing *imitation* instead of innovation. Braibanti has convincingly attacked the practice of transferring a cohesive "doctrine" rather than a pragmatic "muddling through". In Parkistan

....a very sophisticated and meticulous body of rules and directions evolved under the British Raj. If these were highly understood and fairly widely enforced, the basis of a viable administrative system would be securedMany of the alleged deficiencies in administrative systems of some emerging states are due to peripheral, almost nonexistent, understanding of the established system rather than to imperfections in that system. Yet

the official American Attitude in Parkistan (certainly from 1953-1962) assumed that the system itself was bad and that it had to be replaced by American doctrine.³⁶

The consequence is that many policies made in this way are not put into practice. Even when plans are carefully and realistically prepared in developing countries, their implementation, as Waterston strongly argued, is often partial, slow, and inefficient.³⁷ When policies are not made realistically, the chances of successful implementation are even smaller. Professor Riggs has categorized this pattern as "Formalism" where the gap between what is supposed to happen and what actually happens, increases.³⁸ Such policies are therefore innovative only in a declaratory way. One scholar describes this succinctly :

Once the novel effect of the innovations passes, things somehow settle down again at their own level. The new and shining data-processing equipment does not produce the data as expected, the new procedures for processing forms of application for credit do not result in the desired improvement of the credit situation; the new organizations become curiously similar in their operation to the organizations they were supposed to replace.³⁹

Nevertheless, the strategy of disjointed incrementalism is not unknown in developing countries. It was practiced over thirty years ago by the Philippines, although in a rather narrowly political context when the country was not yet completely independent. The action was taken by its president :

Quezon had a quick eye for flaws in a plan, but otherwise no care for details. Osmena, the scholar, loved to approach the situation with wide-angle vision and microscopic precision. "I also come to the same decisions," Quezon would say, "only it takes me less time." "But I never make your mistakes," Osmena would answer. "When I do make mistakes," Quezon would counter, "I use the time you waste making studies in rectifying them".⁴⁰

Several good arguments may be put forward why disjointed incrementalism should be used as a policy-making method in developing countries. If the culture is indeed resistant to large sudden changes, the incremental strategy would be appropriate. The strategy would also take account of the need to conserve the scarce resources in a developing country, by committing them gradually to projects instead of staking them all on a single throw. It would agree with the approach implied in the view that since "the resources at the disposal of our nations are usually smaller than what is really needed, we must learn to husband what is available."⁴¹ The use of the strategy would also be consonant with the lack of information about resources and possibilities of implementation which exists in developing countries. The two distinguished scholars explain: "it is unwise to specify objectives in much detail when the means of attaining them are virtually unknown".⁴²

Further, it also takes account of the impossibility of setting comprehensive objectives in developing countries where the environment change rapidly, for example, because of the dependence on the export of a few primary products, which

...inherently apt to make *planning* impossible in countries liable to rapid changes in the environment if (they) leads to the formulation of categoric objectives of the plan. The external changes that occur in aid flows, commodity prices, harvest, etc., and which are characteristic for primary producing countries...., all tend to alter the attainability of the aggregate objectives precisely because they are aggregates and therefore register every fluctuation that occurs.⁴³

Finally, although incrementalism is not in all respects equivalent to "experimentalism",⁴⁴ it would be compatible with the idea of the "beachhead strategy", "pilot projects", or the "nuclei approach",⁴⁵ methods which seem promising for promoting innovational decision-making in developing countries.

In this regard, there are, however, two important drawbacks to applying disjointed incrementalism to developing countries; one concern "agreement," the other is the possibility that the method encourages inertia and the status quo. Both arise from the fact that Lindblom's recommendation of disjointed incrementalism as a method of arriving at public policy decisions is admittedly limited to "a political democracy like that of the United States and probably also....a relatively stable dictatorship like that of the Soviet Union."⁴⁶

As mentioned earlier, "agreement" as he believed it to exist in the United States, is an essential part of Lindblom's strategy. What is lost in comprehensiveness by deliberately limiting the scope of analysis is compensated for by the fragmentation of decision-making which achieves a compensating comprehensiveness. However.

Dror correctly points out this aspect of the strategy applies only in conditions of stability. Under such conditions "...when all relevant parties have a more or less clear image of the expected results of a certain policy, with a high correlation of subjective and objective probability, a policy agreed upon will ordinarily involve little risk of catastrophe; also, under such conditions, it is in fact much easier to agree on a discrete policy than on abstract goals." In contrast, under conditions of high-rate change, ignorance can produce agreement upon a catastrophic policy; under such conditions, moreover, it is often much easier to agree upon abstract or operational goals (e.g., "raise the standard of living," "increase net per capita product by two percent annually") than on policies, there being no background of shared experience to serve as a basis for consensus on policy.⁴⁷

Lindblom's dependance on agreement raises another serious difficulty. Even if the problem of securing widespread agreement, based on a degree of understanding, is in some measure avoided, it will still be difficult to ensure the kind of fragmentation that Lindblom believes is necessary for the use of disjointed incrementalism. Consider, for example, Dror's "avant-garde developing state," with "a mass leader and a small political elite, who are aspiring toward a rapid and radical socio-economic transformation by means of centrally directed social change, the leader maintaining a strong grip on the masses by both charisma and force, but depending on the support by the military."⁴⁸ Presumably this kind of tight control is intended to restrain "fragmentation" of another kind, arising from "primordial" attachments.⁴⁹ But the agreement in the small ruling group is not an effective substitute for a widespread consensus. In such a state, it is clear that there will be far less fragmentation in decision-making than in the United States, both inside and outside governmental institutions as exemplified by the comparative absence of independent

interest groups. There will also be an absence of the feedback⁵⁰ which make disjointed incrementalism successful. The situation would resemble that cited by Braybrooke and Lindblom as a *contrast* to the way in which public policy on income distribution is arrived at in a country like the United States. There would be a monolithic government, in which, in the absence of fragmentation, income distribution is not the result of a multiplicity of conflicting and reinforcing decisions but is an object of explicit central policy. In this case, central policy makers would attempt an intellectual resolution of all important values. It would therefore be important that "each analyst be comprehensive in his consideration of values."⁵¹ In other words, incrementalism would have been abandoned in favor of attempts to follow the rational-deductive method.

III. CONCLUSION AND OBSERVATION

As a conclusion, we may summarize the above discussion in two ways. First, developing countries may face a dilemma if they wish to employ incrementalism. Lacking for the most part, the shared values which make the method possible in the United States, they may settle for agreement among a small ruling group. But, in that event, they will be unable to secure the fragmentation and the feedback that are essential to the success of the incrementalist method. It follows that there are few developing countries which have a sufficient degree of both consensus and of fragmentation in decision-making to follow successfully the method of disjointed incrementalism.

Secondly, none of the three models just considered is obviously suitable for developing countries. But the reasons for their lack of suitability differ. The objection to the rational-deductive method and to Dror's model is that versions of them may be chosen in order to effect large-scale changes, but that they are not suited for making such changes in a predictable way. The objections to the incremental

method have already been indicated. Few developing countries would have a sufficient degree of consensus and at the same time a sufficiently fragmented system of decision-making to make it feasible. In any case, it simply would not offer rewards which would be judged adequate by governments or by those whose expectations had been raised by governmental promises. Incrementalism has little political appeal. As seen by one distinguished scholar that "man may simply be unable to conceive of the strictly limited, yet satisfactory, advances, replete with compromises and concessions to opposing forces which are the very stuff of incremental politics."⁵² And so, rejecting incrementalism, many developing countries make policies that cannot be put into practice. Dror cites five reasons for this: "(a) poor rational components; (b) distortions of their interpretations of facts caused by their dogmatic ideologies; (c) the very high achievement considered satisfactory by widely held levels of aspiration; (d) internal political demands; and (e) scarce resources."⁵³ Items (c) and (d) dictate the adoption of policies aiming at large-scale change, yet these policies cannot be implemented with any degree of predictability largely because of (a), (b), and (e).⁵⁴

To some extent, targets which are too optimistic may have beneficial effects. Hirschman's principle of "Hiding Hand," that, since we necessarily underestimate our creativity, it is also desirable that we also underestimate to a roughly similar extent the difficulties we face, is to some degree a valid mechanism for stimulating decision makers in developing countries to take risks. But the author is the first to admit the limitations of the principle.⁵⁵ No doubt, also, innovative plans and policies which aim at change but not in any very predictable way, may have their uses in promoting national solidarity. But unrealistic policies are nevertheless harmful to a country's potential and to the successful working of the entire policy-making process.⁵⁶

The final conclusion is that those developing countries which cannot successfully practice incrementalism or which are unwilling to settle for it, will be driven, by their drive for innovation, to adopt policies which have unpredictable consequences. On balance, these consequences need not necessarily be undesirable. Such policies may be the only way in which societies can be changed if the existing situation is felt to be intolerable.

Calculated risks are often necessary because scientific methods have not yet produced tested knowledge about the probable consequences of large incremental changes, small changes will clearly not achieve desired goals, and existing reality is highly undesirable.....In such situations, the calculated risk is the most rational action one can undertake, for all alternatives, including the alternative of simply containing existing policies, are calculated risks.⁵⁷

Two more points are perhaps worth making. First, while developing countries may need radical changes, it does not imply that there is some guaranteed way they can have them by adopting a certain brand of policy-making; because incrementalism may be unsatisfactory for producing rapid change, it does not follow that a preferable policy-making model exists. Secondly, the type of radical innovative policies which may be adopted have not yet been sufficiently clarified and classified to constitute a model. We can say that they may include "rational" and "extrarational" components, but this is not a sufficient basis for spelling out procedures for decision-making as explicit as those for the rational deductive or the disjointed incrementalist models. The radical policies are simply a refuge from awful actual alternatives. They are indeed acts of faith.

FOOTNOTES

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13. Braybrooke and Lindblom, *op. cit.*, pp. 127-132.
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15. *Ibid.*, pp. 66-79.
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17. Dror, "Muddling through....," p. 156.
18. *Ibid.*, pp. 154-155.
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21. *Ibid.*, p. 12.
22. See also, Edward Weidner, (ed.) *Development Administration in Asia* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1970), pp. 16-17; 3-24; 399-421.
23. Dror, "Public Policy....," pp. 312-318.
24. *Ibid.*, pp. 271-272; and "Muddling Through....," p.1.
25. V. Subramiam, "Dror on Policy-Making," *Indian Journal of Public Administration* Vol. 16, No. 1, 1970, p. 96.
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27. Braybrooke and Lindblom, *op. cit.*, pp. 113, 117-119; W.F. Stolper, *Planning Without Facts* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1966) pp. 7-11.
28. Dror, "Public Policy....," pp. 108, 113.

29. Alfred Diamant, "The Temporal Dimension in Models of Administration and Organization," in Dwight Waldo, (ed.) *Temporal Dimension of Development Administration* (Durham : Duke University Press, 1970), pp. 90-134.
30. Etzioni, *op. cit.*, p. 391.
31. Dror, "Public Policy....," p. 109.
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45. See, D.S. Brown, "Strategy and Tactics of Public Administration Technical Assistance," in Montgomery and Siffin, *op. cit.*, pp. 191-193; Weidner, *op. cit.*, p. 414; Waterson, *op. cit.*, pp. 285-287.
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47. Dror, "Muddling through....," pp. 154-155.
48. Dror, "Public Policymaking....," p. 105.
49. Clifford Geertz, (ed.) *Old Societies and New States* (New York: Free Press, 1963), p. 109.
50. On the discussion of coordination by feedback, as compared to coordination by planning, see, J.G. March and H.A. Simon, *Organization* (New York: John Wiley, 1958), p. 160.

51. Braybrooke and Lindblom, *op. cit.*, p. 139.
52. Albert O. Hirschman, *Development Projects Observed* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution, 1967), p. 33.
53. Dror, "Public Policymaking....." p. 110.
54. According to Braybrooke and Lindblom, there are as yet no satisfactory models for decision-making involving large-scale change. Note that Etzioni's "mixed-scanning" approach is not feasible in developing countries: the non-incremental component in the approach is hard to apply because of their control capacities. See, Braybrooke and Lindblom, *op. cit.*, pp. 66-79; and Etzioni, *op. cit.*, p. 391.
55. Hirschman, "Development Projects.....," pp. 9-34.
56. Dror, "Public Policymaking....." p. 110; L. Huberman and P.M. Swazy, *Socialism in Cuba* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1969), pp. 176-179.
57. Dahl and Lindblom, *op. cit.*, p. 85.