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## Design versus implementation debate, again

By: [Rajeev Ahuja](#)

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Recently, an event and an incident again brought the distinction between policy/programme design and its implementation to the fore.

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Prime Minister [Narendra Modi](#), in an event, said to a select audience that even more than reforms, India needed improved implementation; an incident in Kolkata in which a flyover collapsed is attributed to various factors—flawed design, shoddy implementation, challenging context and sheer luck.

Some people find the distinction between policy/programme design and implementation to be artificial. They believe that the design and implementation aspects are so closely connected that if one were to start with a reasonable design which has inbuilt feedback loop, one can arrive at an appropriate design through a series of tweaks in the initial design.

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While this is possible in case of “controlled settings” (characterised by small-scale and less complex issues), in most cases design and implementation phases can be quite long and may take considerable time before early implementation lessons can be factored-in to refine the initial design. That there is a design phase quite distinct from an implementation phase is indisputable.

A policy/programme design can be good or bad in the same manner as its implementation can be good or bad. A good

design is not only technically sound, but also has (1) a buy-in from a majority of stakeholders (lest it gets short-circuited by those who stand to lose), and (2) implementation reality is factored-in by bringing in implementers’ perspective in design discussions. On the other hand, bad implementation can be on account of either lack of or slow and shoddy implementation.

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Depending on whether design and implementation is good or bad, there can be four different possibilities:

Good design, good implementation,

Bad design, bad implementation,

Good design, bad implementation,

Obviously, a good design that is implemented well is the most desirable case (an excellent example being the [Delhi Metro](#)). A bad design that is implemented well is like doing a wrong thing with perfection (states banning liquor sales is a bad policy, even if it's implemented well). On the other hand, a good design that is not implemented well is a missed opportunity (nutrition and health sector programmes have huge scope for improved implementation in some states). Lastly, if a design is bad, it's better if it remains unimplemented—this is the only case where lack of implementation is a blessing!

So, what does it take to implement well?

Having a good design that is eminently implementable is one thing, but getting it implemented is another. Even the best of policies/programmes may fail to make an impact if they remain unimplemented or are not implemented well.

Implementation is all about making things happen. This requires the right set of people with necessary skills and tools, driven by common mission, with clear goals and time-lines. Close monitoring, supervision and regular review of work-in-progress are integral parts of implementation. Making things happen is as much about engineering as about dealing with people. In this sense, implementation is both a science and an art. Many people find getting into the nuts and bolts of implementation to be unintellectual and unglamorous. Hence the need to keep the energy levels of the implementing team high through continuous motivation.

Recently, PM Modi launched the Stand-up India scheme to promote entrepreneurship among certain weaker sections of the society by enabling them to secure easier loans. This is yet another programme in a series of initiatives ([Digital India](#), Pradhan Mantri Jan-Dhan Yojana, Make-in-India, Swachh Bharat, Skill India and so on) that his government has announced over the last one-and-a-half years. These are all well-thought-out initiatives in keeping with Modi's vision for India as well as his government's priorities. Coming from no less a person than the PM himself, these initiatives enjoy political commitment at the highest level. Now to get these initiatives implemented on the ground, he needs scores of ace implementers, such as E Sreedharan—the Metro Man. The success Sreedharan achieved in implementing projects is attributed as much to his missionary zeal as to his management style and the autonomy he negotiated with bosses. Will Modi be able to find such "karmayogis" who can effectively implement his various initiatives remains to be seen.

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