CODESRIA

12th General Assembly
Governing the African Public Sphere

12e Assemblée générale
Administrer l'espace public africain

12a Assembleia Geral
Governar o Espaço Público Africano

عشر الثانية العمومية الجمعية
حكم الفضاء العام الإفريقى

Theorising the intersection of public policy and personal lives through the lens of 'participation'

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Abstract

The continued interest in political economy-inspired perspectives on economic and social policies is an attempt to understand policymakers as human beings who are influenced by values, votes and other factors that were once thought to be exogenous to policy choices. However, there is still little theorizing about those on the other side of the policy equation; that is, the 'ordinary' persons who also engage with policy. The literature on participation attempts to account for the agency of ordinary people in the policy process, but the critique has been made that the discourse on participation often presents a mechanistic perspective that does not take account of the complexities of the human psyche and of human lives. This paper presents a better understanding of how people engage in a very personal and agentic way with policy.

I present a model of participation grounded in empirical research with members of a poverty-reduction project in Ghana, and a conceptual framework informed by the emerging area of an interpretive or sense-making approach to policy analysis. The model is based on the three principles of subjectivity, temporality and situatedness: First, human beings make subjective interpretations of policy grounded in their life narratives; second, temporality is an inherent aspect of how individuals cognitively organize their lives; and third, people experience policy as one of many overlapping contexts in which they are situated.

Introduction

In the constant and oft-times unsuccessful quest for paradigms of development that work, policymakers, researchers and practitioners have come to agree on a few basic principles. Perhaps the most self-evident of these is the idea that development should be fundamentally about people, an idea that lies behind discourses on 'people-centred' approaches to development and the calls to put a 'human face' on development.

The concept of participation is essentially that human beings – their priorities, knowledge, assets and well-being – should be the focal point of development. Participation encourages the recognition of ordinary persons (erstwhile 'beneficiaries' and 'targets' of policy) as social actors who exercise agency in cognition and behaviour and who, to a large extent, determine the success or otherwise of any policy intervention. This paper, however, points to the limitations of participation, as currently conceived and practiced, to fully account for the complexity of people's cognitive and behavioural interactions with policy. I offer an alternative model of participation as an individual's pattern of involvement in a policy

intervention based on their sense-making of that intervention within the multiple and layered contexts in which they live out their lives.

The paper is based on a qualitative study of the Nhyira Beekeepers Association[1], an income-generating project in the Afram Plains District funded by Social Investment Fund (SIF). The SIF provides financial and technical resources to 'community-based' organisations to diversify livelihood options for the poor and to provide them with increased income through various income-generating activities. The SIF in Ghana is a local version of a standardized development programming of the World Bank. It is therefore very much a conventional project in that it evokes many of the themes of current development discourse, including poverty reduction through community participation (cf. Anyidoho, 2005). I use as primary data multiple interviews and observations of 25 members of the Nhyira Beekeepers Association, as well as interviews of SIF and local government officials, and residents of the district. The data was collected during fieldwork between 2003 and 2004; follow-up interviews were conducted with SIF officials in 2005.

The limits of participation

Participation describes the increased involvement of "socially and economically marginalized peoples in decision-making over their own lives" (Guijt & Shah, 1998, p. 1). Participation is an attempt to correct the traditional top-down approach to development policy and programming where those whose lives are most influenced by these processes have the least say in policy making and implementation (Chambers, 1983, 1997). The expectation is that, by increasing people's influence over development policy, the process of social change will be more efficient, more relevant to, and more empowering of ordinary persons (Cooke & Kothari, 2001).

The concept of participatory development has generated an intense level of attention from researchers, practitioners and policymakers. However, the wide usage of participatory vocabulary and techniques often obscures the fact that participation lacks conceptual clarity (Cooke & Kothari, 2001; Guijt & Shah, 1998; Kapoor, 2002; Parfitt, 2004). The majority of the vast literature on participation has focused on debating what the rationale for participation should be (the 'means-versus-ends' debate) and on creating, modifying and applying techniques of participation (Cooke & Kothari, 2001; Cornwall, 2002). Cooke and Kothari

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[1] The name of the group, the town in which it is sited, and all persons interviewed have been changed to maintain confidentiality.

(2001) dismiss these works of "methodological revisionism" in favour of a critical engagement with the idea of participation. They press for research that goes beyond normative ideas of how participation should or could look, to interrogate how participation is actually constructed, by whom and to what ends.

What is missing in the literature, therefore, is a systematic understanding of how people conceive of and enact participation in practice (Cornwall, 2002, p. 10). Research to date has not produced a sound framework, based on empirical studies, to explain how people actually construct their participation (Mosse, 2001; Cornwall, 2002), even though many studies have shown that policy 'targets' may interpret policy in ways that are at odds with the way policy is articulated by policymakers and practitioners (e.g., Bledsoe & Banja, 2002; Buvinic, 1986; Mosse, 2001; Schroeder, 1999; Smith, 1999). My paper attempts to model the process by applying a "sense-making" approach to participation to understand the process by which people arrive at their interpretations of the purpose and personal benefits of a development intervention, which is a necessary first step to understanding how they pattern their participation.

Insights from a sense-making approach to policy making

The key to exploring person-policy interactions is the recognition that the meaning of a policy is not fixed; rather, people make sense of, or impute meaning to, policy (Ball, 1993, 1994; Yanow, 1996, 2000). Rather than an objective response to social realities, the policy process is one where i) both problems and solutions are produced within social contexts; ii) where political actors influence the construction of social issues; and iii) where actors influence the range of policy alternatives that are offered as solutions (Kingdon, 2000; Stone, 1989; Wolbrecht, 2000). Policy invariably contains a multiplicity of sometimes duelling ideas and solutions. As it goes through various levels, meaning is wrested from and imposed onto policy. A sense-making perspective, then, suggests that the policy process, from formulation to implementation, is moved along by social actors who derive meaning from policy and act out those meanings through their choices and actions (Levinson & Sutton, 2001).

In interviews, participants of the Nhyira project echoed the statements in the SIF brochures and policy documents in saying that the project represented for them a way to reduce their poverty. However, situated within the framework personal histories, preoccupations and aspirations, the project was imbued with a second-order meaning below the surface of group consensus. Drawing on the various possibilities that the project offered for bettering their lives, individual project members variously interpreted the IGP as an avenue to

supplementary income, alternative employment, working capital, and institutional access. Those interpretations led them to pursue diverse strategies and different patterns of participation within the same project (Anyidoho, 2005).

In other contexts, the potential meaning of the project might be different from the categories that were found in the Nhyira group and therefore the actual categories of meanings from the Nhyira project may not necessarily be generalisable to other projects. However, what is theoretical generalisable from the Nhyira findings are certain principles of sense-making. I propose that we can understand how people enact participation through the application of the concepts of subjectivity, temporality and situatedness.

Subjectivity

The theme of subjectivity encourages an exploration of all that shapes a person's understanding of a policy intervention and consequently shapes their actions within it. This means going outside of the usual policy spaces in which we examine participation, and also going beyond the usual variables of gender, age, income and education that are conventionally used to explain variations in people's perspectives and actions. Finally, the principle of subjectivity recognises the importance of the individual-in-community.

On the first point, participatory methodology usually involves public discussions and activities around specific projects. Yet lives are not so easily demarcated. As Cleaver (2001) points out, there are other, non-formalized spaces in which policy is negotiated; she therefore advocates a careful exploration of the "non-project nature of people's lives" (p. 38). A sense-making approach accounts for the connections that people make between public and private spheres of experiences. From this perspective, policy is always experienced and interpreted in the context of "whole lives" (Lewis & Maruna, 1999). In my work with the Nhyira group, I included life narratives in my set of research instruments, the underlying theoretical assumption being that life is invested with meaning, purpose and direction within a narrative framework (Maruna, 1998; McAdams, 1993, 1995, 2001). Through narratives, people fit pieces of their lives together in a somewhat coherent whole, laying out cause and effect, and showing the significance of people and events against the backdrop of their lives as a whole. Within these life narratives the income-generating project in which individuals were involved assumed its proper place and meaning, which sometimes were at odds with the meanings and priority that SIF officials presumed it would have.

Second, indicators such as income, age or marital status while important, may not adequately reflect people's relationship with policy, nor explain individual differences in response to

policy. Admittedly, there are some approaches that attempt to account for individual variations and plurality; for instance, the influential Human Development approach recognises that persons who are differently positioned in terms of economic and social assets respond differently to development interventions. In fact, a salient theme of Sen's (1999) seminal work on the Human Development perspective is that individuals are unequally situated in terms of human capital or capabilities and, consequently, in their ability to take advantage of opportunities for self-improvement. Indeed, in my own study of the Nhyira Beekeepers Association, I found that the core characteristics of well-being often modelled as human capital were important in how people explained their participation. Members tended to vary in their approach to the project depending on assets of money, health and education available to them. There were people whose age (and attendant health concerns and family pressures) limited their options for improving their standard of living. However, I also found that the impact of these attributes on their interaction with the project was mediated by their sense-making. Therefore, even members who were similar in age, in material assets and so on, perceived different moments of opportunity in the income-generating project (cf. Anyidoho, 2005). Thus, a person's mode of participation in the enterprise of development is not a neat function of his or her social characteristics and economic assets, important as these are, but also by "emotions, experiences, interpretations, individual longings and identities" (Lewis & Maruna, 1999, p. 233).

Finally, attention to subjectivity implies attention to the individual. What is usually presented in development theory is a composite picture of the "average man", "vulnerable women" or "the rural poor" (Kabeer, 1994). This translates into a tendency for researchers and practitioners to make, at most, cursory acknowledgement of the individual and then straight away to "codify the translation of individual into collective endeavor" as the basis for intervention (Cleaver, 2001, p. 40). This is particularly true of participation, which is usually spoken of in reference to community (Cleaver, 1999). Addressing agency and meaning at the individual level forces us to see participants as people, rather than as a part of some imaginary community. It also forces us to grapple with the complexity of individual agency beyond facile models of the rational man whose decisions are based purely on self-interest and the "social being" who subjects his/her will and preferences to the good of the group (Cleaver, 1999).

The objection to highlighting individual subjectivity may be that policymaking is not made on a person-by-person basis, and that it is therefore impractical to do policy research at the level of the individual. There is indeed a place for groups, and in fact, sense-making is as much a

property of the group as it is of the individual (Yanow, 2000). However, my arguments about individual subjective act as a corrective to the inordinate weight given to groups and organizations in the development literature. Moreover, some attention to individual lives does support policymaking by giving insight into the lives of the individuals who make up the aggregate.

Another possible critique could be that the attention given to individual subjectivity de-emphasizes the power of collective interest to motivate collective action (e.g. Cleaver, 2001; Francis, 2001). This is a concern especially for researchers who are eager to promote participation as a counterbalance to stifling mainstream development paradigms, and who see the fulfilment of this potential through harnessing the power of the masses. I will argue against this notion that attending to individual sense-making implies a neglect of the collective. An appreciation of individual sense-making merely suggests that it can be dangerous to prescribe and proscribe the basis for collective identity and action, as the discourse on "community participation" tends to do (Anyidoho, forthcoming; Cornwall, 1998).

Temporality

Policy makes false assumptions about predictability and stability in policy implementation. The reality is that some level of fluidity is the normal feature of implementation contexts, as a result of changing policy, the vagaries of life, and the dynamism of socio-cultural, political national and global settings. All this implies that sense-making is a continual process.

Studies on policy implementation, using a sense-making perspective, have put forth the idea that policy is continually being formulated. Policy is therefore presented as an iterative process rather than linear progression from formulation to implementation and then evaluation. In other words, policy changes across settings and over time (Hill, 2001; Lin, 2000; Levinson & Sutton, 2001; Spillane, 2004). What has not been adequately explored is the fact that the understanding of policy changes over time even for one person or within one group. In my interviews with members of the Nhyira project, I elicited retrospective accounts of how people's understandings of the project were modified in the course of the project. I found that changes in meanings could be triggered by changes in people's life circumstances; for instance, when a young carpenter in the Nhyira group, who was very involved in the SIF project because he was unable to make a living off his main occupation, found an opportunity to work with a construction company in the city, the role of the project in his life shifted from a primary income-making venture to a means of obtaining additional income. More often

than not, the revisions in the way that individuals made sense of the project were a response to changes in rules about organisation, membership, requirements for obtaining funds, and these changes were largely due to the fact the Social Investment Fund, which initiated and funded the Nhyira project, was in flux in terms of its own organisation, personnel and funding (Anyidoho, 2005).

Temporality is an important concept in our understanding of how people construct their participation because of the unstable policy and life circumstances in which 'participants' live their lives. Many of the 'targets' of development projects are the poor and the vulnerable whose lives tend to be characterised by a great degree of uncertainty. In the case of the Nhyira group, this instability was compounded by the fact that their primary means of livelihood was farming which is greatly dependent on the vagaries of the seasons and climate. It is also true that the usual 'beneficiaries' of these kinds of projects live in developing countries which are very much influenced by patterns of funding and development discourse by donors and influential development 'partners' which are also subject to much variation over time.

Situatedness

It is a truism to say that people live out their lives in many contexts and at many levels, fanning out from interpersonal (family) to wider societal and global settings (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998). Richard Chamber, the godfather of participatory methodology, has sometimes been censured for over-privileging community-level processes (Kothari, 2001) and thus losing sight of the background contexts that shape how people respond to policy. Policymaking in development or any other arena involves actors variously positioned in social, economic and political systems, and with differential amounts of resources to push their interests (Brock, Cornwall & Gaventa, 2001). Yet conventional accounts of participation do not do justice to the political nature of social relations among the various actors in the development process (Cleaver, 2001; Cooke, 2001; Mosse, 2001; Cornwall, 2002; Williams, 2004). Power is a factor in the micro-politics of interactions among participants, and between participants and development officials. Power is also a feature of the institutional, national and transnational settings within which these micro-level interactions take place.

Whether they are conscious of it or not, the meanings that individuals make about themselves and their dealings with policy are influenced by cultural conventions about form and genre, and about what constitutes a good story (Coffey and Atkinson, 1996; McAdams, 2001, Silverman, 2000). Therefore, "individual narratives are [always] situated within particular interactions, and within specific social, cultural, and institutional discourses" (Coffey &

Atkinson, 1996, p. 62). For the above reasons, there are limits to the reasoned agency of individuals or communities, which alone cannot determine the direction and outcome of policy. Action at the local level, while vitally important, cannot be a substitute for effective policy at the national and international level. Participation should not therefore be an excuse to shift the responsibility for development, or the blame for its failures, onto the shoulders of ordinary people, as is always the danger (Amanor, 2001; Williams, 2004).

In general, the concept of situatedness extends prior research that demonstrates that people do not arbitrarily impute meaning to policy, but that their interpretations are shaped by the context of their lives, as well as wider social and cultural influences (Spillane, 2000). However, in these previous studies in this area, the attempt has been to explain people's professional lives in institutionalized spaces by inserting aspect of their 'private' lives into the policy space (e.g. Drake, 2001; Martinez-Flores, 2004). I argue that it is a conceit of policy research to assume that policy is marked off in this way within people's lived experience. This study advocates a shift in standpoint so that the context of sense-making of policy is the broad landscape of a person's world, within which there is no artificial boundaries between the private and public.

Conclusion

This paper presents participation as what happens when people negotiate multiple spheres of experiences. People participate in projects within the flow and logic of lives-in-progress. Importantly, I have presented this negotiation between individual lives and public policy as a continual process that takes place against the backdrop of uncertain life circumstances and shifting policy discourse and practices.

This perspective should change what we expect to see of participation as observable behaviour. In the Nhyira project, individuals patterned their participation on the meanings that they made of the project. From that perspective, non-participation in a specific project for a time did not necessarily imply disengagement with the basic enterprise of development, and entries into and exits from development projects were not always signs of disinterest or lack of commitment among participants (Anyidoho, 2005). Individuals are simultaneously engaged with many different contexts and that means that they are "only ever partly enrolled in the projects of others" (Long, quoted by Cleaver 1999, p. 606). Further, since variability marks both personal lives and policy, people will constantly reassess their challenges and opportunities, and renegotiate their participation. This is a perspective that is largely missing in discussions about participation. In the current literature, inconsistent participation might

put down lack of commitment or to heavy workloads and other constraints. It is helpful to realize that discontinuous patterns of participation may also be due to people's exercise of what Sen (1999) calls reasoned agency in the face of the instability of lives and of policy.

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