

ACCOMODATING MARGINALIZED GROUPS IN THE PLANNING PROCESS

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Keywords: Participatory democracy, deliberation, dialogue, institutions, sustainability, social stratification, policy tools, forest protection committees, decision-making process, gender, developing countries.

Contents

1. Introduction
 2. Need for Participatory Environmental Policies
 - 2.1 Democracy and Participation
 - 2.2 Environmental Issues and Participation
 - 2.3 Participation in Developing Countries
 3. Issues of Exclusion for Marginalized Groups
 - 3.1 Marginalization through Gender
 - 3.2 Marginalization through Power, Religion, Ethnicity and Caste
 4. Mechanisms for Participation of Marginalized Groups
 - 4.1. Role of Non-governmental Sector
 - 4.2 Role of Government Agencies
 - 4.3 Facilitating Policy Tools
 - 4.4. Natural Resource Management Practices
 5. Conclusion- Vision for the Twenty-First Century
- Glossary
Bibliography

Summary

Decision-making about sustainable development often reflects the power dynamics and persistent social inequalities that create profound differences in interests, capacity, and willingness to invest in the management of natural resources. Thus, the process of participatory planning can become another contentious arena in which political and social power is merely displaced from the state to a dominant elite, while offering merely token symbolic input for the rest of the community. To achieve full participation in sustainable development, political processes need to include formal and informal mechanisms that meaningfully involve marginalized groups in the policy process.

1. Introduction

Sustainable development is a complex issue that existing national administrative bureaucracies have been grappling with for some time. Earlier scholars recommended eco-authoritarianism as a means to overcome the environmental crises society is heading towards: some kind of authoritative state was necessary to control societal consumerism that is leading towards ecological scarcity. While these scholars advocated

a centralized form of government for dealing with environmental issues, the nature of present environmental issues and the inability of centralized agencies to deal with them have generated new research that explores the connection between democracy and ecology and endorses participatory options for dealing with environmental issues. Many environmentalists now advocate forms of strong (that is, deliberative, participatory) democracy that stress citizen involvement in the decision-making process. This emphasis on participatory governance has led to a strong tendency to assume a 'natural' congruence between democratic decision procedures and sound substantive environmental policy outcomes. Democracy and enhanced environmental protection are understood to be self-evidently mutually reinforcing, a perspective that is particularly marked in the emphasis on 'participation' to be found in the recent literature on sustainable development. However, how such participatory processes work or should work in practice in developing countries has not been adequately addressed.

This article argues that participatory processes are necessary to encourage full participation of all relevant stakeholders in the conservation of the local environment and also use local knowledge in designing sustainable development programs. Thus, any sustainable development policy must take care to include all the marginalized groups in society, especially women, since they play an important role as users and managers of their surrounding natural resources. Against the background of this debate on ecology and democracy, this article shows how certain groups in developing societies can be marginalized in the environmental policy-making process, even one that is participatory in nature. Drawing on examples from the domain of community forestry and focusing mainly on gender issues, this paper demonstrates how formal and informal institutional mechanisms may be used to give marginalized groups a more meaningful role in the environmental policy-making process. While participatory policies have been adopted in various domains of environmental policy, it is beyond the scope of this article to review all of them. Hence this paper confines itself to an analysis of rural populations in developing societies and mainly uses examples from a community forestry policy program in one developing country to examine the issue of participation in the context of sustainable policy.

2. Need for Participatory Environmental Policies

2.1 Democracy and Participation

Scholars espousing participatory democracy advocate active citizen participation in the process of governance through discussion in multi-stakeholder forums, public meetings, referenda and interactive polling. It is argued that a stronger form of democratic participation will complement processes for interest group and expert participation in policy making by bringing people as citizens into the policy choices that affect their lives. Participation in collective affairs is also valued because through such activity, people define themselves as citizens, and become educated about collective problems and democratic principles. Furthermore, the public formulation of values through civic discourse and the formation of articulate citizens committed to dialogue are also considered to be important goals of politics. Engagement in political debate inherently produces in participants an openness to considerations of public interest; in the participatory model of democracy politics becomes more pedagogical, discursive,

concerned with public rather than private ends, and demanding in terms of active citizenship. Overall, participation not only makes better citizens, but it also makes 'other regarding citizens' who take responsibility for others in collective decision-making. Also, apart from promoting civic virtues, democratic participation is valued as an end in itself. Participation then educates citizens about public affairs, helps relate their individual interests to public needs, and increases their sense of community.

However, this conception of the deliberative model has been criticized by some theorists who seek to make it more inclusive of multiple voices and complex power structures. For example, the strong emphasis laid on critical argument results in a culturally biased conception of discussion that tends to silence or devalue certain groups. To overcome these shortcomings, some scholars propose the idea of 'communicative democracy' that recognizes social difference by explicitly acknowledging that power may enter speech. Similarly, a concept of agnostic pluralism is more receptive to the multiplicity of voices that a pluralist society encompasses, and to the complexity of the power structure that this network of difference implies.

The common theme in the literature is the process of discursive consensus formation, through which groups become engaged in exchange and interaction with other social organizations and administrative agencies and, through constructive dialogue, reflection, negotiation and compromise, ultimately arrive at a solution that is acceptable to all participants. A precondition for such engagement is that the parties recognize each other as legitimate interlocutors, accepting that various perspectives are entitled to representation in the search for an answer that affects everybody's interests, though in different ways. However, even the concept of participation or who counts as a participant is far more complicated than some proponents of participatory democracy would like to believe.

Although these debates serve to bring out the salience of citizen participation and deliberation in the political process, the model of democracy still remains largely inadequate, especially in terms of its applications to developing countries. While acknowledging cultural differences, these theorists fail to explore their full implications—for example, in instances where women or other marginalized groups (lower classes, ethnic groups), who although should be legitimate stakeholders in the policy process, are culturally excluded from communicating in the public sphere. The model assumes that the majority of the population will be able to speak the same language, will share the same social concerns, and, more importantly, all sections of the population will be equally entitled to participate in public debate. But most developing societies are characterized not only by multicultural groups, but also by stringently hierarchical social stratification (based on caste, ethnicity and gender), divergent value systems, a large proportion of the rural population living at a subsistence level, and extreme social disparities between the higher and lower classes, which may result in some marginalized groups being left out of the process of deliberation. While multiculturalism and gender disparity exist in Western societies, the differences in developing societies are much starker and exist on a much larger scale. The lessons of exclusion and inclusion in participatory processes can make a useful contribution in designing sustainable development policies in other contexts also. Hence this article shows why it is important to include all stakeholders: to tap their indigenous knowledge

for promoting sustainable practices and to encourage all stakeholders to take ownership in the agreed policies and practices and to actively participate in sustainable solutions.

2.2 Environmental Issues and Participation

I have argued that environmental problems are particularly suitable for resolution through participatory policy for two reasons. First, environmental resources usually are common property resources and their conservation will involve participation of much of society. Secondly, environmental problems deal with complex interrelationships between human and physical components of ecosystems and the socio-economic values that people attribute to them. Third, because of the scientific uncertainty and trade-offs involving value choices that modern day environmental problems entail, a politics of engagement that empowers citizens to participate directly in community decision-making is necessary to achieve global sustainability. Fourth, environmental problems also transcend national boundaries, they may be local, regional, national or international in scope, necessitating the use of democratic options at multiple levels or aggregation to deal with different environmental issues, depending on the scale and magnitude of the problem. Finally, participatory policies have found favor with environmentalists and environmental theorists as a means of better informing environmental decisions, achieving distributive justice and for intrinsic reasons like the value of active citizen participation as a part of the good life. Therefore, environmental policies provide a good avenue for exploring problematic issues in sustainable development policies.

2.3 Participation in Developing Countries

In developing societies, natural resources, especially forests, have always been significant sources of livelihood, especially for tribal or other rural populations, and have provided the basis of swidden cultivation, hunting, and the gathering of non-timber forest produce. Millions of people depend on forests for their daily survival. They are a critical resource for the subsistence of the country's rural peoples because they provide food, fuel and fodder and stabilize soil and water resources. However, forests are increasingly felled for the needs of commerce, industry, and consumers in distant countries. Research into the effects of this increasing destruction of natural resources has led to a gradual acknowledgment that marginalized peoples are important for sustaining biodiversity. This has resulted in national environmental policy that better serves rural subsistence interests with emerging programs for community and participatory forestry. The importance of involving local people in the decision-making process affecting their lives stems from their better understanding of local conditions. Their indigenous knowledge can contribute to framing policies that may otherwise be drafted by policy makers and agricultural experts who are unaware of the specificities of the local conditions. More importantly, a policy that incorporates local stakeholders and their needs and concerns in its formulation will have a better chance of compliance and success than one in which the local people have no say. Environmental decisions made at the center, in national governments with input from national agricultural institutes without local input are likely to appear sustainable on paper but may prove to be unsustainable when implemented: sustainability is affected by local natural resources are how they are used in each locality. (see Citizen Information Centers, Public Hearings, Participatory Councils, and Empowered Citizens)

In the Alwar region of Rajasthan, India, indigenous knowledge about water harvesting have been combined with modern technology to convert drought-prone areas into water surplus ones. In the village of Gopeshwar in Uttar Pradesh, India, only one member of each household gathers fuelwood once a week from the village forest. Consequently, the village forest is still well-preserved, although most of the neighboring land has been deforested. Sacred groves— small patches of native vegetation traditionally protected by local communities—are another example of how indigenous knowledge and local tradition can contribute to biodiversity conservation. The natives believe that gods and spirits of the ancestors dwell here, and hence anybody who tries to cut down the trees in the grove will incur the wrath of the gods and will be punished. These groves are now vital gene banks of many threatened species.

Some developing countries have begun experimenting with participatory environmental policies, for instance Sri Lanka's National Forest Policy of 1995; Nepal's Master Plan for the Forestry Sector, 1988; Pakistan's Forest Policy Statement, 1991; Zimbabwe's CAMPFIRE program; and India's Joint Forest Management programs. Such programs have aimed at securing the willing participation of the local population to protect and manage forests and wildlife for their sustainable development. They also seek to give the local people a sense of involvement in the decision-making process affecting their lives. (see Democratic Decentralization and the Empowerment and Accountability of People)

On paper at least, these participatory policies signify a radical shift from the archaic model of centralized, custodial state management, to a new paradigm of environmental protection that emphasizes local empowerment through participation and indigenous community knowledge. However, how such policies actually function in developing areas still merits scholarly attention. Using examples mainly from India's Joint Forest Management (JFM) programs, the following sections examine how certain groups can be left out of even participatory policy-making processes.

India is a multicultural society of diverse social groups based on ethnic, caste, religious, and class differences. It has the lowest forest-to-human ratio in the world, with a population of over one billion and less than 10 per cent of the total land area covered by productive forest. Given its cultural diversity, a large rural population, and stringent social stratification system, this participatory forest management policy in India is a good case for exploring the functioning of participatory policy in developing societies. Furthermore, examining participatory conservation strategies in developing countries will contribute towards ascertaining their viability, and help in devising alternative strategies that would offer effective solutions for sustainable development.

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