Useful Outsiders:

Building Environmental Policy Reform Dossiers

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ABSTRACT

'Useful outsiders: building policy reform dossiers' argues that outsiders to environmental policy making in a development context can have an important contributory role in policy reform. Outsiders are broadly defined and include academic scholars, activists, international centres, non-governmental organisations, charities, social movements and trade unions. The role that outsiders can play in policy reform includes the creation of new knowledge through research (often with the subjects of research taking a symmetrically co-productive role), communication of this knowledge to key actors in policy making, and also lobbying. Any involvement in environmental policy in a development context has long attracted well-earned criticism. Earlier anti-development and post-development critiques have tended to dismiss any involvement by outsiders as contaminating and harmful for the 'target populations' for which 'development' was intended. We argue that more nuanced recent debates from political ecology and anthropology may enable outsiders to navigate their way through the many dangers of active participation in the policy making process (for example, incorporation by senior policy making elites, serving dominant economic and political interests or failing to listen to voices marginalised on account of ethnicity, gender, age, wealth). Also, the burgeoning literature on the policy making process is useful in suggesting strategies for promoting progressive environmental policy. The method outlined here to develop a progressive approach to environmental policy making is the **policy reform dossier**. The dossier is a cumulative and integrated data set; it has an explicit political purpose (for example environmental justice); it is reflexive, concerns multi-scale partnerships and aims for a symmetrical co-production of knowledge; it is a flexible tool which allows the user(s) to negotiate their own evolving goals; and a well-thought through set of practices of confidentiality and stakeholder access. The dossier has a number of files on different aspects of the policy that are initially decided by the outsiders themselves and then adapted as the process evolves. In this chapter the following files are suggested: policy goals and related issues, technical and scientific debates, time-line of events, actors in the policy process, actors' narratives and claims', strategies for policy reform, and explaining policy outcomes (evaluation and lessons learnt).

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This chapter provides a method for contributing to environmental policy reform in an international development context for those who undertake research outside the formal policy process. The focus is upon the environment, and its political, social and economic relations as well as the means by which this subject area, understood as political ecology, might become more directly engaged in promoting socio-environmental change. Much research in this scholarly field eschews policy input in favour of radical critique – yet in doing so, we argue, it fails to capitalize on a useful 'outsider' role that, when carefully articulated, may be well placed to promote environmental policy reform in a diversity of development settings. While the 'uses' of political ecology may be many, it is our contention that this outsider role – linked to the elaboration of what we call policy reform dossiers – is one that should be more central if political ecologists wish to promote an agenda of social change. As we also make clear, the creation of these dossiers – understood both as a process and a product – is where the main effort ought to go, crystallizing in a practical manner theoretical, methodological and empirical insights that have been the warp-and-woof of political ecology since its inception.

Political ecologists often pride themselves on being outsiders – critical of mainstream thought. Yet the term 'outsiders' is used here even more widely to encompass individual scholars, activists, research institutes, international centers, official advisors, non-governmental organizations, charities, social movements, in-country federations and trade unions – all of whom attempt to produce new knowledge. In most cases, outsiders bent on policy reform provide policy-makers with new information and arguments to press their case even as they seek to work with them as far as possible throughout the research and policy-making processes. Here too, a 'policy-maker' is not synonymous with an exclusive set of (usually male) elite bureaucrats and politicians in a (usually) distant capital city who shape policy according to the interests of favoured groups (Neumann, 2008). Rather it often involves many other parts of usually dispersed states, as well as public opinion, the press and civil society organizations (among others). Hence the identification of stakeholders and audiences for research is strategically important.

The role of outsiders is inevitably multifaceted. They *create* knowledge through environmental and social science research – a process that entails a significant amount of listening to and learning from others including giving a voice to those who may not be heard by others in policy-making. The latter may involve compiling people's informal knowledge and experience about environmental issues alongside academic environmental science. These outsiders then *communicate* this knowledge to key actors at the heart of the policy-making process in ways that those actors are likely to understand and be persuaded by. Money often plays a part here. In cases of bilateral aid, for instance, financial inducements and conditionalities may also be involved, crucially affecting how influence occurs in relation to policy change. They also become involved in de facto *lobbying* – building alliances with local institutions, social movements, in-country politicians and the popular press to help form an agenda, frame policy issues and disseminate knowledge. This is particularly important where policy-relevant research is carried out by foreigners likely to

have relatively privileged access to research finance and assistance as well as senior government members.

The role of the outsider in environmental policy reform is an underappreciated aspect to political ecology – something that this chapter aims to correct through a detailed discussion of the main assumptions and 'files' of the policy reform dossier. In the process, we offer a methodology for making a difference in the policy arena.

Navigating beyond critique

Our approach needs to be carefully delineated from other policy-related research that is criticized both inside and outside of political ecology. Indeed, such research in an international development context usually involves all-embracing teleological views which assume – rather than state or defend – the validity of their claims. This assumption is condemned by critical scholarship on post-development and the post-developmental state. A first wave of criticism occurred more than twenty years ago but tended not to differentiate between different styles, ideologies and epistemologies of development (Blaikie, 2000). Take for example two famous quotes of that era: (1) 'The last forty years can be called the age of development. This epoch is coming to an end. The time is ripe to write its obituary' (Sachs, 1992: 1); and (2) 'You must be very dumb or very rich if you fail to notice development stinks' (Esteva, 1992: 7).

Since the 1990s there has been nuanced debate as well as revision to earlier critiques (in political ecology, for example, see Peet and Watts, 1996; Bryant and Bailey, 1997; Escobar, 1998; Bryant, 1999; Castree, 2002; Forsyth, 2003, 2008; Jasanoff, 2004; Robbins, 2003, 2004; Walker, 2005; Muldavin, 2007, 2008). This history of debate about development, policy and political ecology is not reviewed here. But two things are clear from it. First, the need for policy engagement has not been repudiated by these scholarly efforts – if anything, pressing social and environmental issues in recent years merely under-score a renewed urgency in this area (Walker, 2006). Second, that the 'outsiders' of interest here – whoever they are – must nonetheless address these debates about post-development and the post-developmental state, since any progressive goal of environmental policy reform will have to engage with the issues and challenges thereby raised.

The policy reform dossier

One promising way to do this is to create the 'policy reform dossier'. Narrowly, a dossier is a collection of papers about a particular event, subject or person. Yet, we use this term more broadly to denote a method for creating, presenting and following through with knowledge from diverse actors in aid of policy reform. Such a dossier is not merely a repository of data sitting on a computer or on an office shelf, but a process of creation, production and promotion of innovative policy-oriented knowledge. Here, development of a policy-relevant political ecology must consider: (i) *what* information is collected (including problem framing pertaining to ethical concerns such as environmental justice); (ii) *who* collects it and the associated politics of data collection (for example, the subjects of research themselves or outsider researchers); (iii) *from whom* (what voices or sources are listened to and prioritized); and (iv) *to whom* this knowledge is addressed. Working on policy reform does not assume support for a state or its political projects. In fact, the dossier can be used to promote counter-research and the knowledge of those

prevented easy access to policy processes across diverse state forms (e.g. 'liberal democracy' or 'authoritarian').

Knowledge needed

The choice of policy-relevant research depends upon prior knowledge:

- Knowing the political terrain and the varied roles of outsiders within different contexts. Where the voices of less powerful actors are ignored or suppressed, the role of the dossier shifts onto different ground in which it may be used to challenge dominant narratives and state legitimacy, of course with political, ethical and practical implications in terms of evaluating 'success';
- Knowing whom to talk to. This requires a choice about subjects (who can co-produce information with outsiders) and audiences (e.g. key players in government and civil society, future policy makers);
- Knowing how to talk to audiences. This requires reflection on how and what to communicate (empirical results, theory, style of argument, development narratives, tropes, ethics, choice of language);
- Knowing the story and argument – and those of the actors engaged with;
- Engaging the interest of chosen actors and audiences from the beginning while ensuring their involvement throughout research and dissemination. Thus, research is integrated as far as possible into ongoing processes of influencing public opinion through the press (where some freedom of speech exists), as well as policymaking and implementation itself (Mayers and Bass, 2004).

It also involves the analysis and presentation of political ecology issues in the form of a database. This must be 'live', dynamic and constantly adjusted during research and advocacy. To illustrate these points further, we next briefly explore the context in which we developed the idea of the policy reform dossier – based on our work at the interface between national governments at all levels (from capital city to the local level), NGOs, activist groups, researchers, universities and other resource centers in the field of environmental policy in Himalayan India, China and Nepal. Although specific to this context, we believe it can be adapted to other contexts in which outsiders might influence policy reform.

Empirical origins

The policy reform dossier builds on our prior initiatives of which three are summarized here. The first was partly based at the East-West Center in Hawaii in 2003, and explicitly addressed the politics of environmental policy in the Hindu Kush Himalaya (HKH) region (Blaikie and Muldavin, 2004a, 2004b, 2004c; Muldavin, 1997, 2000). This project focused on the participatory activity of local land users in the formation and implementation of environmental policy. It analyzed the policy process on either side of the eastern India border with China where sharply contrasting policy regimes exist. The central question was: what is the most effective approach to land management in areas of sloping and mountainous terrain? At one end is a participatory, inclusionary approach such as community based natural resource management (CBNRM). At the other end is a top-down, exclusionary approach such as protected areas based on 'fortress conservation' (Hobley, 1996; Agrawal and Gibson, 2001; Agrawal, 2005).

The second initiative was the pioneering introduction of the policy reform dossier into an institutional setting through a series of presentations and workshops held between 2005 and 2012 in Kathmandu, Nepal by the authors primarily for the International Centre for Integrated Mountain Development (ICIMOD) – an institution seeking to 'capture and communicate natural resource management research results to grassroots clients and policy makers' (ICIMOD, 2001: 2) even as it habitually engages with diverse actors including governments, multi- and bi-lateral donors, NGOs and universities. Refined in cooperation with ICIMOD, the approach was intended to be adaptable to the needs of other organizations and individual researchers—the focus of later workshops in Nepal and China. The goal was to assess and improve environmental policy in practical and politically-feasible ways consistent with the promotion of environmental justice, sustainable resource management, biodiversity conservation and poverty alleviation. As with the first initiative, the stress was on policy reform that would provide a greater voice for marginalized communities and individuals, even as this project also sought to hone a replicable methodology for environmental policy reform in the HKH region (Blaikie and Muldavin, 2006).

The third initiative involved the articulation of the policy reform dossier to forest management reform in India and Nepal. Building on prior work, this project brought together Indian and Nepalese activists, champions of participatory forest management, senior forest management innovators and British researchers with long experience in these countries. The pooling of extensive field data and experiences (including with policy makers at all levels) between project members as well as staff from three Indian universities was critical here. A key output was the book *Forests, People and Power* (Springate-Baginski and Blaikie, 2007) that broadly followed the nine files of the policy reform dossier outlined below. This contribution sought to feed into major forest-policy reforms which were (and remain) high on the national agendas of these countries.

Main assumptions

Drawing on such research experience, and mindful of post-development debates alluded to above, we have found that a variety of assumptions inevitably underpin the creation of a policy reform dossier. Briefly, these are:

1. Policy reform is not a simple matter of 'truth talking to power' (Wildavsky, 1979) – say professionals talking 'truth' to senior policy elites – but also about engaging with actors who are marginalized based on their gender, ethnicity, age (children and the elderly), poverty or education in order to 'talk truth *of* the relatively powerless *to* the powerful';
2. Policy argumentation must engage with diverse audiences in a differentiated manner that is sensitive to their priorities, culture and political orientation;
3. That argumentation also has to explain how 'better' outcomes can be *simultaneously* achieved for different actors and institutions under policy reform;
4. At the same time, such advocacy must be mindful of policy contentiousness due to complex subjective social positioning and unequal power relations among actors that policy reform is unlikely to eliminate;
5. Policy reform promoted by foreign 'outsiders' (common with multi- or

bilateral aid related projects) requires particular care to ensure that creation of the dossier reflects in-country viewpoints – thereby limiting the otherwise all-but-inevitable charges of arrogance and neo-colonialism that post-development literature highlights.

Concurrently, the policy reform dossier has diverse qualities or characteristics that ensure it remains fit for purpose:

(a) Component files are *cumulative and integrated* – they build on existing knowledge generated in diverse settings (e.g. academe, policy institutes, government departments, NGOs, communities), but 'add value' notably by integrating that knowledge within and across files in a way that takes full cognizance of different voices, opposing narratives, and complex scientific findings that span epistemological traditions;

(b) The dossier has a *political purpose* based on an *explicit ethics* (e.g. environmental justice) as it is all about policy *change* – it moves beyond merely describing the causes and consequences of specific human-environmental relations (as in much political ecology work) to ask: what now needs to be done and how should we go about it as policy outsiders?;

(c) It must be characterized by *reflexive* thought since the process is all about multi-scale partnerships, co-production of knowledge, strategic alliances, innovative forms of knowledge and attitude change (notably among senior policy-makers but elsewhere in society too);

(d) The dossier is a *flexible and evolving* tool that allows the user(s) to shape it to pursue their own goals both individually and collectively even as those goals may be adjusted over time in light of insights afforded through working on the dossier;

(e) Finally, it needs to be based on well-thought through practices of *confidentiality* and *stakeholder access* – i.e. who has access or not to part or all of the dossier, how anonymity is preserved where necessary, how transparent the material is and how it is transmitted to the outside world – all issues about the ethics of the *process* of dossier management that are just as important as policy reform outcomes.

Unpacking the dossier

We now describe the component files of the policy reform dossier. There are nine such linked files in relation to our concern with the environmental sector – which is also a desire to frame our approach in terms of political ecology (meaning that other policy foci are likely to require different files). These files will expand and contract over time, incorporate multiple types of data, and reflect the time and budgetary circumstances of the participants.

File 1: Policy goals and related issues

This file asks: what are the most important socio-economic, political, environmental, social, cultural and ethical goals of the policy? These may be implicit in which case they should be interrogated. Next is to ask whether the policy measures rationally serve ethical goals the policy has set itself. The file then assesses the chances that these measures can feasibly be put into practice.

For example, our research focused on projects and programs which expressed goals of environmental justice, sustainability, disaster reduction and livelihood enhancement for the vulnerable. However, outcomes in China and India were often unrecognizably different. The reasons are to be found in the sharply-contrasting political feasibility of the goals, as well as the measures to reach them outlined in project documents (Blaikie and Muldavin, 2013). In cases therefore where policy goals may already have been set and are beyond negotiation, the means to reach these goals are linked to ongoing implementation, and the revision of policy guidelines based upon new information provided by the dossier. In other cases there may be room for maneuver to negotiate policy design and objectives based on prior knowledge collected in previous dossiers.

File 2: Technical and scientific debates
This file identifies key technical and scientific debates about the specific social and environmental issues chosen. It should include scientific research which embraces a logical positivist epistemology (e.g. based on evidence, scientific method/problem framing, sampling, statistical procedure) as well as associated debates and disagreements. In the Himalayan case, the book *Himalayan Perceptions* (Ives, 2004) is an invaluable summary of a long and controversial scientific debate about environmental degradation. Even here, though, skepticism is helpful. Why was the research funded and how was it framed? Was the research funded by and written for a specific client? Was there a case of asymmetrical co-production where the framing of the policy issue or research topic, and even the conduct of the research and the editing of results, were unduly influenced by the client (often the funder)? The file can also link environmental science to environmental narratives to make a case in the name of all manner of different political agendas such as environmental justice, modernization or free-market forces (Keeley and Scoones, 2003; Saberwal and Rangarajan, 2003; Jasonoff, 1994, 2004). This file therefore links to File 6 (Actors' Narratives) where positions taken on scientific debates are identified and linked to specific actors.

File 3: Time-line of events
The main questions here are: what are the important events, issues and laws that affect project policy goals, and when did they occur? How has the policy environment changed during the life of the project or time-based horizon for policy reform? Finally, is there any room for manoeuvre around the main obstacles to policy reform? If the dossier is compiled for a multi-country project or policy that involved more than one nation-state, a time-line for each country may be necessary. Events such as Acts, Bills, Laws, wars, civil unrest, political events (e.g. national elections), and other relevant policy initiatives for each country need to be listed. This can be added to and customized as the project proceeds. Emerging detail of policies (for example, land tenure legislation and practices) and published policy documents can be cumulatively added to provide a comprehensive information resource. Linkages with key policies and practices in other sectors can be highlighted. The time-line may have to include material from long ago if still relevant today (e.g. the 1927 Indian Forest Act). Judgment has to be exercised about the relevance of items to the policy focus in question. The time-line may be customized to the policy or project through time, with added marginalia, photocopied extracts of papers, and Acts, even as it is cross-referenced to other files.

File 4: Actors in the policy process
Several questions stand out for this file. First, which actors are pivotal in shaping the policy environment? Here, a double focus on local agency in policymaking and implementation is essential. This involves not only trade union activity, federations of local organizations, as well as deployment of 'weapons of the weak' (Scott, 1985) by those who may be deprived of environmental justice by reason of class, gender, ethnicity or lack of various material and non-material assets, but also those working in national administrations. Second, who is it best to work with in policy reform? There is often a wide range of potential collaborators, including politicians, social movements, the media, intellectuals, activists, lobbyists, aid workers, national federations of local groups, as well as opinion leaders, policy-makers, senior administrators, and so on. There are 'movers and shakers' in all these groups who may be potential allies.

In addition, it is necessary to be aware of different expectations in policy engagement. There are diverse views held by those in government and civil society about how policy *should* be made. Thus, the 'Truth talks to Power' model sees a world focused on the project cycle, evidence-based research, verifiable indicators, as well as monitoring and evaluation. This 'rational' model makes the reasonable but sometimes naïve assumption that 'truth' (self-evident goals such as justice or poverty reduction based on new and persuasive scientific evidence) will be transmitted to 'power' (policy-makers) that will then modify policy accordingly (Blaikie and Muldavin, 2004a). The dossier may here have to accept that key actors will uncritically adhere to this view. In this case, promoting policy reform may require a critical realist epistemology that reflects more closely conventional policy-making norms.

In contrast, a different and more discursive model embraces a much wider cast of actors who are acknowledged to influence policy, however indirectly and circumstantially. This multi-level cast of actors may include social movements, local groups, national federations of local organizations, the media, intellectuals, activists and lobbyists, entrepreneurs, Chambers of Commerce, bi-lateral and multi-lateral development aid, international financial institutions, international, national and local NGOs, local chiefs, local government and the public themselves, be they resource users, clients, users of a service or groups on which the policy focuses. In this model, scientific information is produced through avowedly political processes linked to whom gets funding and how problems are framed, as well as who gets listened to and what selective appropriations of new knowledge are made (Long and van der Ploeg, 1989; Blaikie and Muldavin 2004a). Inclusiveness is paramount here. Thus, there are actors in civil society who are far removed by distance and culture from the formal policy apparatus (e.g. select committees, departmental drafting committees, politicians, lobbying groups). People on the ground also 'make' or in broader and more informal terms 'shape' policy — that is, they interpret, strategize, comply or actively resist it — long after official documents become law. This can be a complex iterative process such that policy outcomes are rarely attributable to any one actor or process, thereby belying for instance a simple linearity between scientific knowledge and policy-making. As such, analyses here must be careful to avoid dividing the policy process too abruptly into policy-making and implementation phases (Clay and Schaffer, 1984).

Attention in this file should finally be given to the local rural or urban political

economy, and within it, how differences of class, relative wealth, ethnicity or gender shape who makes decisions and represents 'the community' to outsiders. Thus, for example, a diagram or mental map of the actors and their linkages (see File 5) in a project can be made, allowing those who might be drawn into collaborative work (including the organization compiling the dossier) to be identified.

File 5: Linkages between policy actors
This file is a direct follow-up to File 4 with it central questions: what are the effective or 'real' operational linkages between actors? Where does real power to shape policy outcomes (both at policy-making and implementation stages) lie? Are there any irregular, illegal or corrupt practices that substantially affect policy goals?

Researchers need to be savvy here. For an astute choice of potential collaborators**,** it is necessary to understand the degree of discretion exercised by officials to interpret laws, rules and regulation at different levels, and how they do so. What are the effective operational links between actors? The answer to where real power lies involves an understanding of who has the power to do nothing, pass responsibility down the line, or make independent judgments in a responsible manner. Work on the dossier therefore relies upon knowledge of how the policy process works for any given initiative. It is necessary not only to have a map of project actors, but information too on their inter-linkages. Actors are linked in various ways. For example, there are chains of formal command from the capital encompassing such things as delegation, implementation, influence, access, corruption, and flows of information — all within a context of an unequal distribution of power. Understanding 'power' here is of course a difficult process. Here it can be appreciated as a means to get others to do what you want which, in policy terms, is an ability to shape policy, make decisions and implement them in intended ways. There is a danger of representing these formal linkages with lines, as in an organigram or diagram thereby giving the impression that policy-making is linear – which it most definitely is not. Usually, maps of linkages will be much simpler. Again, while the organigram as a map of formal decision making can be useful, a politicized informal organigram (essentially a network of power relations), that can be enlivened by knowledge of day-to-day bureaucratic procedure is an essential part of understanding how the policy process works. A map of a key administrative network for a chosen project (including informal and non-state actors) could also be useful in this regard.

Let us illustrate this point with one example, Thus, in our research in the eastern Himalayas of China, local government representatives, forest bureau extension agents, forest guards, local militia, party leaders from township to village levels, peasant producer associations, state-owned companies, international NGOs, 'outside' entrepreneurs, village women's committees, and particularly important households and community members, were all intricately linked in the contested process of interpreting and implementing the sloping land conversion program (SLCP) that had been imposed by central government. The intersection of effective operational linkages, multiple forms of power, as well as myriad 'illegal' and 'corrupt' practices ensured a highly uneven visual mosaic of outcomes to the policy. 'Greening' the hillsides and ending subsistence agriculture on steep slopes materialized primarily in terms of the introduction of new cash crops—from walnut groves interplanted with contract-farmed tobacco and medicinals, to mulberry or tea plantations, or

single species eucalyptus or pine forests. Such crop choices represented the outcome of struggles between the varied interests of the actors noted above. As such, their relative power in policy implementation can be read in the emergent new landscape (Blaikie and Muldavin, 2013). This situation in turn exemplifies just how complicated the linkages between key actors can be (Mosse, 2001).

File 6: Actors' narratives and their claims
The central question in this file is: what are the policy narratives of key individuals identified in previous files? Narratives are a way of making sense of complex, often contradictory situations (for a discussion, see Hajer, 1995). Narratives are not 'just talk', but persuasive constructions with a beginning (e.g. assumptions, problem framing, issue choice), middle (notably argumentation, supporting evidence, justifications) and end (above all, what should be done [see Keeley and Scoones, 2003). Policy narratives make claims often stated implicitly as assumptions in order to persuade and legitimate (e.g. Roe, 1994; Apthorpe and Gaspar, 1996; Apthorpe, 1997). The Himalayan example graphically portrays a number of environmental claims with the latter based on scientific proof, previous policy 'success', indigenous technical knowledge and development theory, to name but a few (Blaikie and Sadeque, 2000). How the production of knowledge creates consent is a display of how institutional forces shaping knowledge production converge with political interests (Scott, 1998; Forsyth, 2003; Goldman 2005). Those transnational actors who gather data, decide their utility, and design the institutional means to help disseminate it via new norms play a powerful role here. In contrast, local processes of knowledge construction (ITK) and linked claims that it is more suited to local environmental management than top-down and 'off the shelf' knowledge may be contentious and vulnerable to dismissal as 'unscientific' and 'backward', even as a 'respected' institution's (e.g. some large NGOs) stamp of approval (through scientific validation, GIS, etc.) may end up strengthening the claim, thereby giving it global and regional legitimacy and circulation. In our current research, for instance, the continuing persecution of shifting cultivation by some actors on the one hand, and the countering *Shillong Declaration for Shifting Cultivation* (ICIMOD, 2004) on the other, represent two contradictory views about shifting cultivation, both based on coherent environmental narratives that deploy scientific claims to support their argument.

File 7: Policy argumentation
Central here is what are the most effective ways in which the policy reform goal may be served in terms of how to best make the arguments for the case to particular actors. Specifically, answers to the following questions are needed: first, how does the project or policy engage with other policies, laws, regulations and guidelines? Second, are there counter-narratives which may contradict the goal of policy reform, and how may they best be addressed? Third, is the language in which the dossier is written appropriate to communicate policy argumentation to all audiences? In situations where there are a number of different first languages used by actors, when is an international language such as English, Spanish or French appropriate and when are national or minority languages better used, and for what level of audience (international, capital city, regional and local)? Lastly, what are the appropriate media for communicating to different audiences (workshops in cities, well-

publicized meetings at rural sites with free admission, scientific papers, films, newspaper articles, broadcasts, etc.)? In short, new policies have to be 'marketed and sold' (Mosse, 2003).

This file usually involves engagement between contradictory narratives (building on evidence accumulated in prior files). Policy argumentation is thus important here to almost all actors, especially those institutions consciously trying to impact the policy process (e.g. 'knowledge and information centers'). This is because such argumentation is crucial to actor acceptance and persuasion (i.e. getting people to change their views and behavior in the policy-making process) let alone the institutional legitimacy of policy-dedicated organizations. Issues about the grounds for proof are central with scientific validation being a major one, but with other claims made based on ethical and political values (e.g. gender, equity, human rights).

Yet policy argumentation is only partially a rational activity (Kingdon, 1995). For example, the Indian Forest Department might show scientifically the deleterious impact of shifting cultivation on 'green cover' and a related decline in commercial timber production, while an international NGO might conversely show scientifically that shifting cultivation is less destructive of biodiversity than settled agriculture – with each stance possessing its own scientific validity (Fox *et al*., 2009). Both positions may be 'true', and hence policy struggle may be thereby entrenched. In contrast, different arguments that are presented to various audiences may show an evolution in thinking, as different policy actors are appealed to in different ways.

File 8: Strategy for policy reform

The primary questions in this file area are as follows. Firstly, what are the major opportunities and constraints to policy reform? The answer will comprise a summary of many of the files, drawing up strategic decisions as well as lower level tactics to reach policy goals. Secondly, and conversely, who may be adversaries to policy reform, and can any initiative afford to ignore or bypass them? Thirdly, understanding these opportunities and constraints, what are the specific steps in the emergent policy strategic 'campaign'?

This file is in many ways the considered outcome of earlier files. It is time-bound and may be added to even daily at critical decision-making times by actors. It will involve reviewing the data and information in the previous files to enable a strategy which will identify 'tipping points', key people to see as the campaign unfolds, problem areas and people, as well as difficult parts of a policy narrative that are vulnerable to being misunderstood (and therefore eventually disliked, discarded or downgraded). In our Himalayan case study, for example, a senior forester, a Minister, a leader of a District Council or NGO, a representative of an international funding agency or a social movement— each requires a different approach. As noted, many decisions will be time-bound and must be made urgently, necessitating that Files 1 through 7 are up-to-date and useful. The formation of a strategy for policy reform is the culmination of all other files and is only as good as the information and level of thought that has gone into each of the previous files.

File 9: Explaining policy outcomes: evaluation and lessons learnt

This file concerns monitoring and evaluation of the dossier to learn from policy experience. It is the most difficult one to

compile for two main reasons. The first is that the policy process is usually an ongoing story without a definitive ending. Outcomes can be identified and evaluated at a particular point in time, but the outcome 'keeps on coming out' and changing as it does so! The second is that there are many unacknowledged causes for formal policy change. For example, a policy may be up- or downgraded in terms of administrative and financial priority without any written evidence. Governments change, national policy shifts and ongoing projects and programs shift with them. At a lower level of administration, personnel are transferred, which may change how a policy is interpreted and implemented at different levels. Both these reasons contradict those who may wish to show that their own contribution has made a positive impact. Simply, there is a great deal of 'noise' affecting clear links between cause and effect in policy decisions. An outstanding example occurs in our research into participatory environmental management in western China and eastern India. Here policy documents of a number of land management and forestry projects in Meghalaya (India) and Yunnan province (China) indicated similar concerns about sustainability, as well as being pro-poor, gender sensitive and process-orientated. However, outcomes were profoundly different in each country, with considerable variation notably at local levels, due to complex and ever shifting personnel dynamics (Blaikie and Muldavin, 2013). Many factors affect causality such that often they can only be cautiously hypothesized.

The primary questions to ask here then are as follows. First, what were/are the policy outcomes addressed by the dossier? Can they be explained? Is it possible to identify the effects, if any, of the dossier upon the policy process? Secondly, what specific aspects of various actors' roles in policy work contributed positively or negatively to stated policy goals? Thirdly, what is there to learn that will be useful for further policy analysis and work? Fourthly, has the policy reform dossier suggested wider lessons providing something useful to say about particular policy areas more generally (e.g. in the Himalayan context on such things as gender mainstreaming, common property resources, participatory natural resource management, poverty alleviation and income generation for the poor)?

The question remains to be answered as to how far it can be expected that policy review, analysis and planning can reliably incorporate lessons from past policy. How often has current policy learnt from its predecessors? The rationalist answer is: it often has (and past success is indeed a strong and logically accepted claim by audiences to whom this assertion is made). There are lessons aplenty here—on best practices, policy cul-de-sacs, inspired tactics, as well as successful policy structures and processes. While maintaining a clear recognition of the limits to policy reforms, we propose the dossier as a means to improve cooperation amongst varied actors to increase their power and potential impact through current and future interventions. Such an engaged political ecology enables, we hope, a much wider set of actors and institutions at multiple scales to participate actively in the policy process than hitherto – all with an eye to promoting the more environmentally just conditions that most political ecologists call for.

Conclusion

We have argued in this chapter that political ecology provides outsiders with important analytical tools to contribute to politically-progressive reform of environmental policy. We suggest a more activist approach to

policy reform than is common, rather than the inward-looking and unengaged critique typical in the field, and that may never be heard outside the academy. However any outsider role on policy reform has to be informed by a wide ranging analysis of topics, including technical debates on environmental issues, multi-scale political dynamics, as well as the policy-making and implementation process itself. To this end, we have suggested a linked series of files on these topics that we call a 'dossier'. The latter is a dynamic research tool, constantly updated to provide a clear and well-researched path for contributing to environmental policy reform in cooperation with a wide variety of actors in civil society and government.

This is a methodology for making a difference in the policy arena, with all the potentials and pitfalls that it encompasses. It provides a means by which political ecologists can give voice to actors too often not heard in formal policy processes. These frequently are the most vulnerable community members in locales that are the focus of our research as well as state policy in practice. Political ecologists using a policy reform dossier approach can help ensure the integration of these actors' informal knowledge and experience about environmental issues into the policy process in an effective and persuasive manner. To avoid pursuing such an opportunity on the grounds of maintaining a more 'objective' or less 'interfering' stance, we argue, is to ignore the reality and responsibility of our privileged positions as relatively well-funded and connected researchers and outsiders. Engagement through the 'dossier' thus not only leads to potentially significant new theoretical and substantive insights. It also claims a space in which we can utilize the career-enhancing outcomes of our positionality and work in the world to give at least something back to peoples and places that inform and inspire our intellectual projects.

Notes

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