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Outline

• Why should theory inform policy (in theory)?
• Is there a “science policy” gap? Are we producing “usable” knowledge?
• From theory to praxis:
  • What can we learn from “transdisciplinary” research approaches (at the latter stage of your research)?
  • How does engaging in real-world problems affect our positionalality?
• I will share some examples of research and what I have learned.

How can (and why should) theory inform policy

• In academic and policy writing, to put forward an argument is to propose an explanation using an ideal concept and to back this up with evidence
• Concepts:
  • Concepts only exist as an idea
  • Your concept links you to an academic field and a debate within it
  • We choose concepts depending on what we see as important
• Policy is not value free— it is informed by theory (for example neoliberal economics vs Keynesian economics)

Need to be reflexive in conceptual framework

• Proposed construction of Ka Lone Htar dam connected to Dawei Special Economic zone
  • Zaw Aung worked with young community researchers for village data collection
  • Produced a short descriptive report in Burmese with community documenting existing community resources
• For academic paper, we started with “enclosure of commons,” “commodification of water,” and “social movement theory”, but finished with “accumulation by dispossession”
  • Field research revealed the historical (partial) integration of the community with the market

Addressing the “science-policy” gap?

- So... we have a concept/ explanation, but can it influence policy?
- Experts lament my research is not adequately considered in policy making... “We” need to “bridge the science-policy gap” (Smagjil and Ward, 2013)
- Differentiate between mode 1 research production (fundamental) and mode 2 research production (real world problems) (Gibbons et al, 1994)
- Early approaches for research to have an impact were:
  - “trickle down”
  - “transfer and translate”
  - (Means of communication has revolutionized with the internet and social media)

Transfer and translate is still common ...

- The evolving politics of water scarcity, urban water governance and (de)centralization in Hakha Town, Chin State
  - Based on MA thesis, then follow up research visit
  - Conceptual approach is political ecology
  - Argument that water security not just technical, or even about governance, but also addressing historical injustices
  - Sought to engage with urban water governance via:
    - Report; Policy briefs in Chin and English
    - Academic conference in Mandalay and Hakha (in 2018); Public forum (in BKK)!
    - Opinion piece in Chin in Hakha Times
    - “Comms” work (including social media)

There are many types of knowledge

- Under what conditions is knowledge “usable”? How is it different from data?
- Whose knowledge is useable (.... and whose is not)?
- What is “knowledge”: A justifiable belief (van Kerkhoff and Lebel, 2006)
  - “Scientific knowledge”: Justifiable according to the standard set by adherence to accepted scientific practice and peer review
  - “Local knowledge”: Justifiable according to claims of connection with a particular place.
  - “Practical knowledge”: justifiable on the basis of experience in practice
  - “Political knowledge”: justifiable according to experience within the political process.

Is the “science-policy” gap really a gap?

“This [“gap”] metaphor is problematic because it implies a void waiting to be filled rather than a need to understand the coproduction landscape as a space already populated with formal and informal rules, practices, and capacities. An alternative perspective ... is that science and policy can be coproduced where the boundaries between these groups are blurred.” van Kerkhoff and Lebel (2015:13)
Transdisciplinary approaches are multi-actor and integrative

- The practical path: committed to the exploration of new options for solving societal problems;
- The scientific research path: committed to the development of interdisciplinary approaches and methods; new theory and research questions


Transdisciplinary approaches are multi-actor and integrative

- Shared understanding of research problem between actors
- Shared definition of research question and design
- Integrative research strategies
  - Integrated theoretical frameworks: Boundary concepts, such as vulnerability; resilience; sustainability...
  - Integration of the social and natural sciences: Challenging; for example risk as perception versus statistical definition
  - Model building: For example, integrated water use models etc...
- Provisional results are checked by all

Entails “deep” participation

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Transdisciplinarity: What can go wrong?

- Warin Chamrap community, Ubon Ratchathani town regularly experiences flooding
- Flooding is getting worse for some, due to changing land use changes
- Our initial assumptions:
  - Political ecologies of flooding
  - Potentials for green infrastructure
  - Modeling
- We organized initial meetings in Jan 2018, attempting TR from the beginning
  - Community leaders
  - Local government
  - Royal Irrigation Department (RID)
- Our project missed the application deadline ... but we learned of the need for a new way of thinking about modeling and water resource management

(Uninternational) transdisciplinarity

Aeberhard and Rist (2009)

- Studied transdisciplinary co-production of knowledge in the development of organic farming in Switzerland
- 1920s to the early 1970s:
  - Niche “biodynamic farming” movement to address decreasing soil and food quality; tied to a philosophy of “Anthroposophy”; most innovation and research emerging from the farm
  - Close link between farmers, extension agents and researchers, who shared lecturers (by farmers), a newsletter and an association
- Since 1970s
  - Increased professionalization and institutionalization of research; FiBL was established through private means as govt was not interested.
  - Independent “certification” established (BIO SUISSE)
  - Growing recognition of “organic” farming by civil society and public sector
  - Growing markets for organic food since 1990s; farming increasingly for economic reasons.

From theory to praxis: Learning from transdisciplinary approaches

- Engage with core actors through the whole process
  - In problem definition
    - Is there a demand for your research?
  - In confirming your findings
  - In sharing your research outcomes
    - Build legitimacy and trust across actors
- Beyond “fire and forget” communication
  - Build your own capacity to engage
  - Engage with your organization
  - Engage in policy meetings, consultations and forums, media (debates), including blogs
  - Build the capacity of others to engage (“co-productive capacity”)

Reflections on positionality and reflexivity

- Research is not neutral. Embedded within it is various values, histories... and our own positionality
  - From our disciplines
  - Within our networks
  - From our own personal background (education; gender ...)
- Reflexivity in research:
  - How we categorize (culture, gender, class etc…)
  - How we represent ourselves/ perform in our research
- If we engage in a "real world problems", how does that affect (or render visible) our positionality?
Recovering and valuing wetland agro-ecological systems and local knowledge for water security and community resilience in the Mekong region (RECOVER)

- Collaboration with Dr. Kanokwan Manorom, Ubon Ratchathani University
- Changing state-civil society relations towards the Rasi Salai Dam
  - 1990s: Opposition
  - Late 2000s: PSCA
- Academic concept: “Coproduction of ecological knowledge and ecological governance”
- Research method: Knowledge coproduction amongst multiple actors from 2015 to 2017
- Shared problem definition: Wetlands have become degraded and need protection
  - Research started through collaboratively mapping wetland resources and use
  - Built unprecedented trust and social learning
- Action on educational tourism could proceed, but wetland zoning would require more time

www.csds-chula.org/recover/

Summary

- Academic knowledge alone is not enough to achieve sustainable development .... multiple forms of knowledge and multiple actors are involved
- The earlier in the research process we work together, the better; process is everything to build trust, legitimacy, networks, and a shared understanding of the problem and the research
- Engaging in real world problems for a researcher means maintaining academic research principles (furthering knowledge and theory) whilst simultaneously working with others ... (maintaining a critical engagement ... both ways)

Thank you for your attention

I’m looking forward to our discussion

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