



Ecological democracy and Mekong

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Ecological Democracy

- “involves the rights of people to have democratic control of their local environment without the undue influence of outside economic, racial, or political forces”
- “Greater social governance over state planning and capitalist production processes. ..against the exploitation of working people and nature” (Anthony & Faber 1998)
- “dramatically re-vitalized participatory democracy” which is “arising from popular ferment, aspiration for a better life, intolerance of the abuse of power, and collective and personal determination to build a just and enduring community” (Morrison 1995)
- “Ecological democracy has three requisite conditions: altruism, access to scientific information, and openness of the state” (Dietz, York & Rosa 2001)
- “Informed, inclusive and participatory decision-making successfully combined with environmental sustainability”

Ecological Democracy

- Institutional trappings of democracy can not bring societal change
- Attempts to re-think democracy in deliberative or radical lines (usually include defence of the direct and deliberative models of democracy)
- But some interpretations lack concern about how power dynamics can adversely influence plan development and implementation even in seemingly open and inclusive processes

Also relates to discussions on

- Environmental State: domain-specific sets of democratic rules that place **affectedness** in the first ring of concerns without annulling or ignoring the historical and cultural roles of national communities
 - “All those potentially affected by a risk should have some meaningful opportunity to participate or otherwise be represented in the making of the policies that generate the risk”
- Environmental citizenship
 - causers of harm have a non-contractual and nonreciprocal **obligation** to look outward as ecological citizens –human-to-human as well as across nations, cultures, species boundaries and generations
 - ecological citizenship is founded on (discursive) community rather than territory

Local and Global dimensions

- Building correspondence between “those who make decisions. Those who possess the relevant knowledge, those who are responsible for decisions and those who are affected by them” (Eckersley)
- Bringing together principle of affectedness and principles of belongingness & sense of place
- Transnationalisation (e.g. North-South power imbalances) and decentralisation (“act locally, understanding of the diversity of local realities and cultures)

Anthropo- vs. ecocentrism

- "any enhancement of democratic values in an ecological context that does not sacrifice ecological values, or any enhancement of ecological values that does not sacrifice democratic values" (Dryzek 1996) - understanding environmental politics primarily in human terms.
- "ecological stress is on adapting, renovating, and deepening democracy rather than replacing it, rendering it fair and inclusive with respect to non-human interests as well..." (Saward, 2001)
- Siemenpuu: struggles over sustaining the environment cannot be divorced from struggles for democratic participation

The radical forms

- Do not offer escapes from:
challenging hegemonic development paradigms
and
radical changes in the structures of society

Mainstreamed forms

- Enhanced public participation in existing institutions, support to civil society, community user-groups etc..

Some critics

- Western-bias: Majority of the work is first-world centric e.g. definitions of civil society and democratization have strong western overtones, lack of understanding how third-world developmental state works
- Overly simplified claims of positive correlations between democracy and enhanced environmental sustainability (Midlarsky 1998, Walker 1999)
- Not enough pragmatic agenda – need to focus more on democratizing both state and society

Ecological Democracy and River-Basin Politics

- Mekong: array of political actors – state agencies, international conservation groups, advocacy networks and social movements
- States: Developmentalist interests dominating
- Donors: On the other hand the current development orthodoxy recognises public participation as necessary for achieving sustainable and socially just development
- Local struggles: over access to and use of water and water-related resources
- Fox & Sneddon: engagement with environmental politics contribute to democratization, especially in Mekong

Mekong

- Politics of seeing the river-basin in terms of: “development engine/energy production” vs. “conservation region/biodiversity” vs. “livelihood system/fisheries”,
- Local struggles: struggles to maintain resource-dependant livelihoods (ecological conservation is not an end in itself, not extending rights to ecological entities)
- Interesting to see - from local struggles to more transnational level? Linking local sites of resistance to more extended networks of transnational democracy?

Spaces for Participation?

- The degrees of political freedom and spaces for civil society organisations (CSOs) differ significantly in the riparian countries, Thailand having the most active and effective advocacy groups and networks and Laos and Vietnam having very limited space for CSOs.
- In all four countries there have been struggles or contestations over large-scale water development projects (e.g. controversies over Pak Mun dam in Thailand, dams on Sekong, Sesan and Sre Pok Rivers in Cambodia, Son La dam in Vietnam and Nam Theun 2 in Laos).
- The struggles have also in some cases resulted in attempts to create more participatory processes (cf. Pak Mun).
- A significant push for more participation has come also from aid agencies or influential INGOs (Molle, 2005).

Examples and paradoxes of Participation in Mekong

Regional level (MRC)

and

Community level (in Cambodia)

Studying the Justifications

How the modernist plans and aspirations, of which large-scale dams are the very flag ship, are legitimized when:

- actors in the region are aware of the failures of large dams elsewhere
- also domains of knowledge evolving that actively contest the scientific and expert knowledge used for policy and development plans of the basin
- Current international discourses of development and the requirements: objective science-based risk assessments and participatory processes
- Participation in knowledge production is presented as a key for redressing the power imbalances that shape the production of knowledge

Objective Assessments?

- Objective science-based risk assessments? Neutral results?
- The politics of knowledge production implies also much more 'invisible' nuances of power relations than intentional misuses or falsifications of the assessment processes.
- The models generate powerful visualizations of the basin as a manageable system ripe for development interventions, which enables technocratic calculations and planned water allocations.
- The knowledge production including the MRC's models are implicitly tied to the redistribution of rights to use the environment. The knowledge production and the production of political order (in terms of management and policies) should thus be seen as mutually constructing and reinforcing one another
- E.g. flood pulse and fisheries over-looked
- And if taken into account: fish is seen as the "doomed resource", without any development potential - so the destruction of fisheries dependent livelihoods, even if seen as lamentable, is also seen as inevitable

MRC and participation

- A first Public Participation Strategy was circulated in 2003 and a booklet about *Public Participation in the Lower Mekong Basin* was published in 2005
- In 2008 two of its programs – Basin Development Planning (BDP) and Hydropower – have hosted more extensive stakeholder consultations. These are not perfect, but for MRC they are already significant steps on an untravelled road of more participatory engagement with non-State actors.
- MRC's program on fisheries has sought ways to create more space for local knowledge and spaces of inclusive decision-making at the community level

However

- The participation strategy gives all the power to the riparian states to decide who they consider relevant stakeholders and who they do not.
- Participation has been enhanced mostly within the MRC's own structures and member governments and has not been extended to meaningful engagement with critical NGOs or local communities
- The fisheries program is side-lined from the Commission's core activities

Limits of the debate

- To what extent the expertise is truly opened for public?
 - Seems that expertise is opened but debate is permitted only within received expert framings and what is not opened for public participation is the actual agenda setting
- The participatory approaches of knowledge production do not necessarily challenge the overly scientized nature of politics.
- In dialogue processes, even the contested knowledge domains tend to be debated in terms that do not challenge the technocratic core of assessments.
- But science does not give indisputable answers in policy-making. This kind of approach “*simply obscures the political nature of decisions about how we should live*” and set 'free' policy-makers from the inherently political nature of the decisions (de-politicization)

Decentralisation and participatory projects in local/community level

Example from Cambodia

New participatory orthodoxy

- Acknowledgement of the shortcomings of top down approaches and governing from distance
 - “New participatory orthodoxy”
 - to stress on empowerment, stress on the marginal, to distrust on the state, and to celebrate the “local” or the “indigenous” knowledge

Why to discuss participation critically?

- Mainstreaming of participation depoliticizes development
 - Not necessarily related to radical change in the structures of society
 - Development agents pursuing their agendas under cover of community consent
- Is being co-opted and used as justification for such a variety of projects that it is experiencing semantic devaluation
- Often used in ways that are detached from local realities
→ unintended results

Paradox: Participation through top-down approach

- Global tool boxes or local realities?
- Can endogenous solutions emerge from top down approach?

Naivism and unintended results

- The projects are often based on too naïve assumptions and they fail to see and address the dominant power structures
- Reproduction of asymmetrical power relations

Optimistic Naivism 1

- Either biased with seeing 'communities' as consensual and harmonious
 - A myth of community as a homogenous entity
 - Failing to recognise the power differentials that exist in rural areas and the heterogeneity of local communities

Optimistic Naivism 2

- Or trusting on communicative ideals to solve the issues of conflicting interests and lacking the understanding of “cultures of harmony”
- Thus not problematising how democratic communicative practices work when social relationships are built on fundamentally different worldviews centred on authority figures and patronage
- “Cultures of silence and harmony” challenge liberal democratic assumptions about individuality and open participation

Reluctance to participate – as a form of everyday resistance

- Reluctance of rural communities to enthusiastically rally around participatory projects
 - fatigue? from the clash of externally promoted change and internal reproductions of inflexible culture
 - or creativity? – a response triggered by certain circumstances – expression of ‘everyday resistance’ to external policies that do not make sense to the rural population → sign of agency rather than complacency

Discussion

- The concept of ecological democracy: Useful or not? Western bias? Radical vs. mainstream interpretations? Naivism (cf. harmonious communities)? Too much idealism?
- Mekong: what should be done? The role of donors? The role of northern NGOs & activists?
- Experiences from other regions?
- Research interests?
- Action interests?