

In Search of the Mythical Policymaker

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Lisa Waldick

Ajaya Dixit, of the Nepal Water Conservation Foundation, is part of a [local water management project](#) involving India and Nepal, supported by the International Development Research Centre (IDRC). This three-year project, now in its second phase, began in 2000. The project examines small-scale, local solutions to water scarcity, taking a community-based approach to natural resources management (CBNRM). In this interview, Mr Dixit speaks about how his team views the dynamics involved in influencing water policy in South Asia.

Development researchers generally all want to have their research findings reach policy makers. In doing so, you say that researchers often envisage a "mythical policymaker." What do you mean?

If you look at the way development management has gone on, particularly in South Asia over the past 50 years, you see that it essentially builds on the colonial model the British started 150 years ago. That model had a very strong managerial focus, and the colonial government had its own reasons for this management style. In the post-independence period, researchers in most countries of South Asia have made the assumption that there is a decision-maker who is amenable to the kind of research reports and policy analysis that we, as development researchers, undertake. And we assume that this decision-maker goes through the reports, synthesizes them in his or her mind, and then implements a programme based on research results. This assumption is not always accurate.

If the "mythical policymaker" is not responsible for shaping policy, who is?

There are many actors now. You have the government, the civil society movement (whether you call it the non-governmental organization (NGO) movement or something else) and activist groups. You also have the market: whether you like it or not, markets are a strong presence. This policy terrain today does not only involve a policymaker. It's actually a public space where a variety of stakeholders are involved: the policymaker, the politicians, civil society, the general public.

You've divided these stakeholders into three main categories: managers, social auditors, and users. Can you describe the managers and the social auditors?

Immediately after independence, government departments — the managers — became responsible for providing basic services to the people. For a long time, these departments *were* the major actor. But they had a style of management that focused on construction, and externalized social and environmental costs. These costs have become more apparent over time. As a result, there has been a lot of questioning, by social activists and environmental groups, for example, groups we call the social auditors. These are the ones who say, "Yes, there is a cost," and "Yes, there are environmental consequences." These groups are very articulate and vocal. Groups in the South also have access to groups in the North with similar values of equity, social justice, and concern with environmental degradation. So there is a kind of synergy between groups across national boundaries.

Decision-makers have to be more responsive to the kind of critique that comes from the social auditors. You really cannot sweep this critique under the carpet. The more you ignore it, the more violent and intractable the conflicts become later on.

Why do you think that development researchers need to be aware of this dynamic between "social auditors" and "managers"?

We see research as being able to help inform decisions. Social auditors will debate a particular option with managers. Through this contestation, it is hoped that alternatives will begin to emerge. What researchers can do, essentially, is empower the debate: they make it much more informed, instead of very polemical. Research can provide informed analysis of arguments. It can also define the physical, social, and institutional limitations of the proposals being debated in the public space. And it can put forth models, or approaches, or alternatives that make sense.

The other group you identified were the "users." How do they influence the way a given policy option actually plays out on the ground? What do you think researchers need to bear in mind when considering this group?

On one side, you have these policies, models, and paradigms for how to provide basic services, like drinking water, irrigation, and energy. But when you go into the field you sometimes see a big contradiction. For example, people do not have water even though a water system has been built. In some cases, water doesn't come for two or three days at a time. So how do people really cope? People will look for other options, something that is within their control, something that is decentralized so they don't have to depend on a public utility, for example. If people don't get water from the existing irrigation canals, what do they do? They go and buy a pump and then dig holes in the ground. Their productivity improves, but the ground water level will go down.

On the other hand, there is an example in Rajasthan where a river that was dry 15 years ago has come back to life. It's flowing again. An advocate worked with the community to build small rainwater tanks. What villagers did was capture the rain and allow that rainwater to seep into the ground to augment the groundwater storage. So over a period of time, they built up the groundwater reserves and the natural system came back. During the last drought, every other village in that region had no water, but this particular village had some.

We cannot think that users have no strategy, no response of their own, and no understanding of the problem, that they are just waiting for a decision to be implemented. This is not the case.

Why do you think it is important to articulate these dynamics between the various stakeholders?

It leads to a recognition that, for water management approaches to be much more responsive, one needs to have a balance between the managers, the social auditors, and the users. The management terrain is then more creative. It will not solve all the problems, but would facilitate a response to a particular constraint at particular time. When new constraints emerge, the managers have to provide a new set of solutions again and the auditors have to critique those. That dynamic has to go on. In this whole terrain, I think research has a very crucial and important role to play by focusing on the kind of issues that these groups [the managers, social auditors, and users] identify and then contributing reasoned and informed analysis to the issues.

For more information:

Mr Ajaya Dixit, Nepal Water Conservation Foundation, GPO Box 2221, Kathmandu, Nepal; Tel: (977-1) 528111/521013; Fax: (977-1) 524816 / 521013; Email: nwcf@wlink.com.np

[Promoting Local Water Management in Nepal](#), by Lionel Lumb