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Book Review
Understanding Environmental Policy Processes: Cases from Africa *by James Keeley and Ian Scoones*

reviewed by Godwell Nhamo

Keeley, J., & Scoones, I. (2003). Understanding Environmental Policy Processes: Cases from Africa. London: Earthscan.

The choice to review *Understanding Environmental Policy Processes: Cases from Africa* is based on its relevance to the theme of this journal. The fact that policy matters are complex and that translating intentions into actions is difficult is well documented (Hill & Hupe, 2002; Sabatier & Jenkins-Smith, 1999; Howlett & Ramesh, 1995; Parsons, 1995; Lane, 1990). The book also provides useful perspective on the manner in which global environmental policy agendas find their way into national and local-level policy initiatives. This trend has characterised environmental policy making in southern Africa, where much environmental policy has been shaped by global environmental policy agendas, furthered by international donor funded initiatives.

James Keeley and Ian Scoones make it explicit that their focus is on understanding environmental policy processes: their formulation, and the way in which policies change.

> While there has been lots of work on the technical details of environmental policies and the pros and cons of different options, there has, surprisingly, been less reflection on the nature of the process by which policies arise and how they do – or often don't – change. This book, then, asks why do particular perspectives on environmental change become so entrenched in policy? Which actors are involved? Whose interests are served? Whose knowledge is included and whose excluded? (p.viii)

The authors draw our attention to the interface of knowledge, power and politics. These concepts are presented in the first three chapters dedicated to 'Knowledge, Power and Politics: Environmental Policy Processes in Africa' (Chapter 1); Understanding Environmental Policy Processes: A conceptual map' (Chapter 2); and 'Global Science, Global Policy: International Policy Processes in Africa' (Chapter 3). These opening chapters on the relationship between knowledge, power and politics are followed by in-depth analyses of this phenomena in three African country case studies. The case studies discuss environmental policy processes in Ethiopia, Mali and Zimbabwe. The final chapter of the book provides readers with challenging questions to consider and 'spaces for engagement'. These 'spaces for engagement' are focused on the relational dynamic between science, experts and citizens in policy-making processes.

The authors present three (to some extent overlapping) conceptual frameworks for

understanding environmental policy processes and environmental policy changes. These frameworks include: a political interests and policy process framework; an actor-oriented and practice-based framework; and a framework which views policy as discourse. Each framework provides different conceptual and theoretical perspectives on the relationship between knowledge, power and policy. For readers in the southern African policy-in-practice context, a distinctive feature of this publication is the introduction of diverse knowledge systems in policy change, including local knowledge.

Traditionally, scientific knowledge has been associated with the hegemony of policy change and this was supported by rational linear top-down approaches to decision making. However, as is illustrated through the three African case studies, knowledge does not get established in the form of policy following a simple linear process of development and implementation. Inclusion of the sociology of scientific knowledge construction provides for different vantage points and insights into policy processes. Keeley and Scoones (2003:30) elaborate further:

> Policy contests – which are substantially contests about knowledge – run throughout the policy process from macro to micro scales. At the same time (as examination of the relationship between science and policy suggests), neither is policy-making a gradual process of moving closer to an ideal and 'rational' approach to problems. (Keeley & Scoones, 2003:30)

The authors maintain that many still assume that scientific knowledge should drive environmental policy making. Narrating the role of science, technocracy and expertise in environmental policy processes, Keeley and Scoones maintain that scientists verify facts about environmental reality, and policy-makers come up with policy options in line with the 'received wisdom'. When this happens, policy formulation becomes increasingly technocratic with 'science given a major role and lay publics often labeled as ignorant or incapable of handling the scientific complexities that guide decisions' (Keeley & Scoones, 2003:25). This scientific approach to environmental policy processes has recently been the subject of wide ranging critique, that raise a number of important questions in understanding environmental policy processes. For example, what happens to democracy and public debates when environmental issues are reified as technical and the sole preserve of experts?

In his sociological 'science studies', Latour (1987) describes how scientists create facts by closing controversies and through black-boxing uncertainties from broader scrutiny. As such, scientists advocate for the 'mutual construction' of knowledge with the help of complex political networks that rubberstamp universal applicability of laboratory findings. In this relationship, specific environmental policy language is developed that calls for strong use and application of objects, data and statistics as well as objectivity and procedures. This is done by 'virtual witnessing' through 'inscription devices' like journals, conferences and online discussion groupings (*ibid.*). The scientific facts are then rendered modern and 'objective'.

Keeley and Scoones indicate that since the 1992 Earth Summit, the internationalisation of the science-policy interface has become a crucial phenomenon. There are ongoing debates on many issues, among them: desertification, environmental education, biodiversity, deforestation

and waste management. This has witnessed the creation of scientific commissions, advisory boards, international initiatives, expert consultations, donor-driven technical support and the hosting of conferences. These initiatives embrace the practice of environmental policy informed and shaped by 'crisis situation' perceptions.

The role of local networks in co-producing 'facts' is also illuminated in this publication. 'While global knowledge, linked to global institutions, initially appears all powerful, such framings should not be taken for granted' (Keeley & Scoones, 2003:28). The construction of local knowledge and policy is informed by different borrowings from international discourses; interactions of different actor networks in local settings may help to shape the 'accepted' definition of the global. The 1995 Soil Fertility Initiative (SFI) for Africa is one such case described in the book.

Policy narratives for the potential crises and disaster management of soil resources in Africa were made and shaped in the SFI. To open policy, space citations were drawn from the 1996 Convention to Combat Desertification (CCD), the UN Food and Agricultural Organisation (FAO) and World Bank publications. Two narratives portraying (1) soil fertility and (2) environmental degradation crises were set up (Keeley & Scoones, 2003:41). The narratives linked the crises to food shortages and a figure of Africa having a cereal deficit of up to 27 million tonnes by 2020 was raised, in order to open up policy space. Linked to these narratives were alarming scientific 'facts' cited from Sanchez *et al.* (1997, cited in Keeley & Scoones, 2003) work regarding the loss of nutrients from African soil. The authors also indicate how the SFI ideas were extended through the creation of global and local actor networks that included ex-USA President Jimmy Carter. The SFI was then adopted and is due for implementation in 13 African countries. Action plans were jointly produced with the help of FAO and the World Bank. However, a lack of money has once again led to the failure to change policy intentions into practice.

Another policy issue addressed in the book relates to compromises that arise 'between local, national and international processes' (Keeley & Scoones, 2003:163). The practices of international science are put together through funding, collaborative research and collegial networks. From the case studies of Ethiopia, Mali and Zimbabwe, the book reveals that science and technical policy are not as universal as usually portrayed. Instead, it is the interactions across spatial scales and competing policy sub-systems and networks of actors and ideas that shape national policy processes. Although the book focuses on how science shapes environmental policy, the authors hint at its misuse and advocate for the rightful position of 'local' knowledge systems in environmental policy processes. From the Zimbabwean case study the authors present useful insights on how the proper mix of local/lay public wetland farming knowledge and the 'scientific' agricultural extension knowledge has changed environmental policy at a national level (Keeley & Scoones, 2003:150–160).

The book also elaborates on new initiatives in policy change processes that include networks set up by NGOs, researchers, government departments and pilot projects. In addition, citizen action, the media and environmental campaigns are seen to be other avenues for exercising voice and influence in environmental policy change. In Mali, cotton producers protested against 'cotton bureaucracy' in light of reduced producer prices and opened up space for policy change. The role of the media in Ethiopia and Zimbabwe has been under strict monitoring and

the independent media does not have the kind of policy space that it might be advocating for. For example, any narratives down-playing land reform in Zimbabwe will meet strong challenges from the government.

Lastly, the authors touch on prospects for participation in environmental policy processes, which they claim can be enhanced by:

> Asking different questions, initiating the search for solutions, exposing previously black-boxed uncertainties, and challenging received wisdoms, the technical basis of policy prescriptions can thus be opened to wider scrutiny and debate (Keeley & Scoones, 2003:178).

'Fact-building' and knowledge for policy is more about the establishment of facts within policy sub-systems and networks than the 'facts' themselves. Howlett and Ramesh (1995) identify five key sub-systems and networks in environmental policy processes: the cabinet and parliamentarians; appointed officials ('bureaucracy'); interest groups (e.g. NGOs, CBOs, labour and industry); research organisations; and mass media. As such, it is the reach and influence of these networks and their stability in mainstream institutions locally, nationally and globally that is central to environmental policy knowledge construction.

Given that policy-formulation is complex, political and power-laden, the science-policy relationship should be treated as a social and mutually shaping process. Overall, the authors challenge the nuanced, informed diagnosis of policy processes and present an option to move towards methods and mechanisms that 'foster more inclusion of previously marginalised voices' (Keeley & Scoones, 2003:179).

Note on the Reviewer

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