

Public Policy Analysis and Water Issues in Southern Africa

Proposing a new research strategy in water studies

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The objective of this policy brief is to argue in favor of the development of a sub-field of political science, i.e. public policy analysis (PPA) in Southern Africa. We specifically focus on water policy studies, which more than any other policy sector suffers from an over-emphasis on the technical/managerial side of the issue. In this policy brief, we will briefly introduce the core basis of PPA school of thought, and then evoke the challenges and the opportunities of applying PPA to Southern African politics.

Introduction

As far as political analyses of water issues in Southern Africa are concerned, one usually gets the impression that the research results come close to what should have constituted the starting point of the study in the first place. In a bid to explain ineffective policies, the analysis concludes on factors such as the "lack of capacity", "lack of expertise", "lack of experience", "problems of integration of various sectoral policies", "problems of coordination of work" amongst departments of State and so forth. However, if one seeks to account for dysfunctional administrations or inefficient policy-making, the idea of inverting the *explanans* (the explaining variable) and the *explanandum* (what needs to be explained) should be taken into consideration. In other words, one cannot be satisfied with, for instance, a mention to a lack of capacity as an explanatory factor. This "lack of capacity" should be considered as the phenomenon to be explained in the first place.

There are several reasons for this tautological pattern of explanation, or lack thereof. The most immediate one relates to the influence of the management-oriented discourse in the water sector, which tends to emphasize more technical and apolitical aspects of water issues (Mollinga, 2008). A more recent development of the governance aspect in the water sector does not remedy this apolitical approach either; as "governance" is also taken in a technical and functionalist manner. It is often believed that problems can be resolved by investing in material means and/or by introducing new political measures but without paying due attention to the context in which these

measures will be applied. On the contrary, we posit that even by securing sufficient funding or recruiting staff with more adequate profiles, there is a high probability that the result might be exactly the same: a failure to ensure public service delivery.

A problematic aspect of governance analysis applied to water issues -but also to other sectors- is that the administrative level is never seriously taken into account (Darbon and Crouzel, 2009). In contrast, the primary focus of public policy analysis (PPA) approach is studying the administrative apparatus. PPA underlines the fact that regardless how brilliant a policy plan might be, its success ultimately relies on civil servants, their routines, culture and practices. Yet, while PPA tradition has been growing over the last 30 years in the Western academic world -amounting to almost a third of the academic production in political science in France (Boncourt, 2007)-, noticeably PPA remains an under-developed sub-discipline of political science in Southern Africa (if it ever exists at all). The same statement could be made for most of the Western political studies focusing on African societies. In France for instance, apart from anthropologists developing a "socio-anthropology of African public spaces" (Olivier de Sardan, 2005) or political scientists studying African politics from a "bottom-up" approach researching the "popular modes of political action" (Bayart, 1981), no real PPA approach applied to African political societies has been undertaken, with the exceptions of attempts made for instance by Enguéléguélé or Demange (Enguéléguélé, 2008, Demange, 2010). The explanation for the weakness of public policy analysis studies in Southern Africa lies in the widespread belief that public policy -at least in the

way it is conceived in the so-called developed world does not really exist as such in Africa. Instead authors speak about a public policy void or emptiness (Chabal and Daloz, 1999) as much as they use attributes such as “collapsed”, “failed”, “corrupted”, “ineffective” or “weak” to characterize the state itself (Debiel and Lambach, 2007). Contravening this postulate, we argue that however weak, inefficient or non-cohesive states might be in (Southern) Africa, public policies exist and have an effect on societies. Therefore, opportunities to apply the PPA approach in these countries are available. By extension, if we admit the existence of public policies -although imperfect ones- in Southern Africa, we must assume that the administrative apparatus -as the implementing body of the State- adheres to some sort of logic and that there is a rationale behind its actions. As such, it deserves to be the subject of a sociological inquiry demonstrating that it is not pure chaos that governs the functioning of these administrations as it is too often assumed by the international donors’ community for instance.

What PPA consists of

PPA has been developed on the premise that public administrations are not mere executive bodies of the political level. Thus PPA takes its distance from the juridical approach of public administrations, focusing on what is actually happening “on the ground” rather than the official organization charts and/or formal policy frameworks. PPA tradition introduces three major shifts from former mainstream political science studies: a shift from the idea of State homogeneity; a shift from a fascination for the political will; a shift from decisional “fetishism” (Lascombes and Le Galès, 2007).

- Firstly, the PPA has shifted away from the myth of an impartial and homogenous state with the realization that the state is actually composed of several ministries and departments, each possessing their own culture and their specific ways of doing things.
- Secondly, it has shifted away from the belief that the political elites and top-ranked officials -very often political appointees- are the only ones making the decisions that count.
- Lastly, it has shifted away from over-emphasizing the decisional phase in the policy-making process. The PPA tradition is exceedingly critical of the “policy cycles” approach (Jones, 1970) which considers public policy-making as a rather linear process. On the contrary, PPA underlines the fact that there is no unique and well-delimited-in-time decisional phase, nor does there exist a clearly identifiable problem definition phase. These phases actually stretch across the entire policy-making process as they are often reformulated during the implementation phase. This is

hardly surprising. The PPA denies the existence of a unique decision-maker, rather proposing the existence of policy-makers. These policy-makers strive to reach somehow obscure targets without any readily identifiable beginning and real end. The complex and interactive policy-making process is characterized by a number of improvisations along the way (Hassenteufel, 2008). This means that, contrary to managerial and rationalist conceptions, PPA does not assume a problem-solving orientation of public policies in every case as a clear identification of the public problem at stake is seldom straightforward in public policies. PPA espouses a constructivist conception of public policies. It implies that the ability to identify the contours of public policy is one of the objectives of PPA. It is never considered as a *given* or as a starting point of the research undertaken (Muller, 2011). Moreover, the implementation phase in policy-making becomes the main focus of PPA. In a word, within PPA “*the interpreters and the audience are the new focus of the analysis, and no longer the conductor or the music piece*” (Lascombes and Le Galès, 2007).

Challenges and advantages of PPA applied to Southern African policy studies

PPA approach originates from the cardinal work of Harold Lasswell’s in the 1950s in the United States of America. Lasswell coined the term “Policy sciences” to describe what was at the time conceived as applied research with an operational scope. European PPA subsequently departed from the illusive rationalist optimism of policy sciences’ tradition. Indeed, the expression “sciences” illustrates how PPA’s main objective was to help governments *optimize* their political decisions. In that respect, it attempted to answer questions around the identification of the “best” conditions required to reach a “better” political decision. Relying on quantitative methods (principally statistical analysis) and actor’s behavior analyses, “policy sciences” therefore demonstrated a decisionist bias. Linked to the increase of state interventionism and public regulation after the 1929 crisis, Policy sciences’ research objectives could be summed-up as follows: How can the study of interests’ formation help decision-makers to establish good and efficient policies? And, given the belief that political decisions always aimed at reaching clearly set objectives, how could policy sciences help save constituents’ money? (Muller, 2011).

Policy sciences raised a number of criticisms in the USA, mainly regarding their assumption of rationality. As early as the 1960s, the sociology of organizations illustrated some evidence of limited rationality among fragmented bureaucracies but also within the same public administration (Simon, 1945). Moreover, other research works showed that non-state actors were also taking part in public policies. In the past, public

policies had been perceived to correspond to actions undertaken by the state only. When imported to Europe and especially to France starting the 1970s, PPA literature began recognizing the role of diverse actors within public policy. Among these actors, we not only find the regular departments of state but also parastatal agencies, experts and consultancy agents, interest groups and lobbys, social movement organizations and NGOs, and so forth. Thus, the state is no longer at the core centre of the analysis. This statement has motivated the shift from a reflection in terms of “public policy” to an analysis in terms of “public action” (Thoenig, 1998). With it, “public policy analysis” has become the “political sociology of public action” which corresponds to a contextualized analysis of the interactions among various actors across different political levels -from the local to the international level- (Hassenteufel, 2008). By opening the circle of relevant actors of public policies to non-public actors, PPA makes it possible to transpose the approach to the African context. Especially there, the state could hardly be seen as the unique not even central political actor of African societies. This is because of a limited capacity and most of the time a contested legitimacy of the state on the African continent.

This research initiative should not be considered as a simple transfer of research approach from the North to the South however. Implementing and adapting PPA in a (Southern) African context also represents an opportunity for a real contribution of (Southern) African PPA to recent debates in the Western political science discipline. Indeed, two dimensions make it particularly interesting to develop PPA in (Southern) Africa as it constitutes an observation field without any equivalent to reconcile political sociology (concerned with politics) with PPA (concerned with policies) on the one hand and on the other hand to build bridges between PPA and international relations tradition.

Firstly, for a long time, African bureaucracies were considered as one of their kind, i.e. a very exotic research object. The strong politicization and personalization of African bureaucracies has often been perceived as an impediment for a scientifically sound dialogue with Western situations. However, more and more contemporary works in Western political science regret that political leadership (political here in the sense of politics, i.e. the competition between political parties for the acquisition and exercise of power) has become an underestimated variable of public policy analysis specialists. Secondly, the international exposure of public policies in (Southern) Africa has for long been (wrongly) perceived as a specific feature of public policies in the developing world. However now, authors acknowledge the growing influence of international stakes on national policies across the globe and not only in

developing countries. Authors are thus advocating for the closing-up of the gap between PPA subfield and international relations subfield in Western countries too (Smith, 2012). Because much attention has already been given to these aspects, no doubt that the general debate within Western political science will benefit insights from (Southern) African PPA developments.

Conclusion and perspectives

The objective of this policy brief is to argue in favor of the development of a sub-field of political science, i.e. public policy analysis (PPA) in Southern Africa, focusing specifically on water policy studies, which more than any other policy sector suffers from an over-emphasis on the technical/managerial side of the issue. In our view, PPA would map the way forward in water policy research in Southern Africa if one seeks to understand the implementation gap between the water reform Acts and the reality on the ground. In that respect, the prospects of applying PPA to the study of the South Africa National Water Act (NWA) could provide a long-needed socio-political analysis of the Department of Water Affairs. For instance, it could shed light on the role that its regional offices have played in the delayed establishment of Catchment Management Agencies (CMAs). Moreover, giving a careful account of the “institutional realignment process” which put a halt to the CMAs’ implementation process for a couple of years would certainly constitute a case in point to assess the interference of politics into policy and inspire a way to reconnect political sociology analysis with the study of public policy. Lastly, the increasing importance of the transnationalization of public policies can be studied through the influence that so-called international “best practices” in the water sector has exercised over the drafting of the 1998 NWA. Surely, the adoption of decentralized river basin organizations in a country characterized by centrally-driven planning of massive inter-basin transfers provides a good illustration for this. No doubt that the slow pace for establishing these catchment management agencies has a lot to do with the difficulty to combine this imported solution with the South African reality.

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