

Building Participatory Organizations for Common Pool Resource Management: Water User Group Promotion in Indonesia

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Summary. — States are increasingly striving to create participatory local organizations for joint management of common pool resources. What local conditions determine success of such state efforts? What effect do these efforts have? Drawing on controlled comparisons between three districts in Indonesia and an original survey of 92 water user groups, I demonstrate that local political contexts condition the effectiveness of participatory irrigation policies. When irrigation is politically salient, local politicians pressure bureaucrats to better engage with farmers. The data also show that training programs are not as effective at increasing water user organization activity as frequent contact between bureaucrats and farmers.

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Key words — common pool resources, participatory management, local government, irrigation, Southeast Asia, Indonesia

1. INTRODUCTION

Since the 1980s, a growing body of research has emphasized the capacity of local organizations to manage common pool resources through collective action (Bardhan, 1993b; Ostrom, 1990, 2000; Ostrom & Gardner, 1993; Wade, 1987). In this work is an implicit, and sometimes explicit, critique of state efforts to control resource management. State control, or even interference, often eviscerates the institutions for collective action which have evolved over generations to deal with challenges in their environments (Agrawal & Chhatre, 2007; Ostrom, 2005).

This extremely valuable literature often implies a dichotomy between local organizations and a hierarchical centralized state, at times employing empirical tests contrasting the effectiveness of the two (e.g., Lam, 1998). Framing the world in this way, though, glosses over the fact that many common pool resource systems are jointly managed (Agrawal & Benson, 2011). In most countries, state policies are involved more than ever in common pool resources, often through participatory methods incorporating citizen groups (Agrawal, 2007). Rather than having either independent groups or state agencies individually manage resources, we instead see state actors promoting local organizations to accomplish developmental tasks in close collaboration with the state (e.g., Barr, Dekker, & Fafchamps, 2015; Edmonds, 2002). Often these organizations are products of top-down state policies rather than bottom-up collaboration among resource users. The questions then arise, under what conditions do these policies result in the creation and encouragement of effective participatory organizations? What effect do state efforts have?

These questions have broad-ranging relevance, from fisheries to farming villages to forest communities. As developing countries adopt participatory policies, often spurred by the international aid community, it is of vital interest to understand the local conditions that facilitate implementation of these policies and the effect of efforts to incorporate service recipient participation (Mansuri & Rao, 2013). In this essay, I examine these questions through investigating attempts by the Indonesian state to develop water user associations (WUA) to assist in the operation and maintenance of irrigation systems.

Irrigation has long held a privileged place in discussions of participatory management of common pool resources (Lam, 1996; Moore, 1989; Ostrom, 1990, 1992; Wade, 1987), and Southeast Asian cases have figured prominently in the discussion, both for their successes and challenges (Araral, 2005, 2009, 2011; Bruns, 1993; Fujiie, Hayami, & Kikuchi, 2005; Korten & Siy, 1989; Ricks, 2015; Svendsen, 1993; Vermillion, Samad, Pusposudardjo, Arif, & Rochdyanto, 2000). Recently, scholars focused on Indonesia have begun to analyze the national politics that shape irrigation policies (Bruns, 2004, 2013; Suhardiman, 2013, 2015; Suhardiman & Mollinga, 2012), an area of research often overlooked in earlier analyses (Mollinga & Bolding, 2004; Suhardiman, Giordano, Rap, & Wegerich, 2014). Synthesizing and building upon this work, Suhardiman and Giordano (2014) came to the conclusion that greater policy emphasis must be placed on farmer–agency interactions, suggesting that a sub-national focus on the farmer–agency relationship might provide better results than previous efforts to engage national-level policy (Oorthuizen, 2003; van der Zaag, 1992). Through a better understanding of local-level interactions, the goals of participatory irrigation management may be achieved.

Expanding on this point, I contend that the local political environment shapes implementation of participatory policies

* This project would have never been possible without the guidance of Sigit S. Arif and comradery of the lecturers and graduate students at the Faculty of Agriculture Technology at Gadjah Mada University. Ginsa Tomesi, Mohamed Salihin Subhan, Taufik Nur, and Yodim Kusuma provided invaluable research assistance. Special thanks go to Amy Liu, Ijlal Naqvi, Nigel Lo, and Rick Doner for their suggestions on drafts and data analysis. I acknowledge the assistance of the international office at Gadjah Mada University and Indonesia's Ministry of Research and Technology in facilitating my time in Yogyakarta. The research was supported by a Fulbright Research Grant and a Dissertation Proposal Development Fellowship from the Social Science Research Council with funding from the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation. Additional resources came from Singapore Management University. Thanks also go to the anonymous reviewers and editor for extremely helpful comments. Any mistakes in the paper are my own. Final revision accepted: August 18, 2015.

for resource management. Using a controlled comparison research design of three districts in Indonesia, I show that the success of state efforts to promote WUA was determined by the relationship between irrigation officials and farmers, which was contingent upon the political context of the district (von Luebke, 2009). Only when irrigation was an important political issue did the district leadership obligate bureaucrats to promote farmer participation. Thus, I underscore the vital role of local governments in shaping the incentive structure of street-level bureaucrats (Lipsky, 2010).

Further emphasizing the impact of interaction between officials and farmers, I present a second finding drawn from an original survey of 92 WUA. Here I demonstrate that training programs, although yielding some benefits, often fall short in their goal of promoting participation. Indeed, short-term or temporary training programs may even be counter-productive to institutional development and building a participatory relationship between state actors and farmers. The data show WUA activity was most strongly affected instead by the frequency of interaction between state officials and group leaders.

These findings emphasize the importance of local political contexts in determining the implementation of participatory policies. Successful outcomes in co-production of services require that bureaucrats and farmer groups develop the capacity to collaborate in joint management of resources (Evans, 1995, 1996; Lam, 1996; Ostrom, 1996), but decisions about policy made by centralized agencies are unlikely to succeed in this endeavor (Pritchett & Woolcock, 2004; Suhardiman & Giordano, 2014). Citizen demands translated through local politics, though, can encourage the development of participatory organizations and a collaborative relationship between state actors and service recipients.

The remainder of this essay is structured as follows. In Section 2, I provide a brief overview of some of the obstacles states face when promoting participatory organizations and hypothesize how these might be overcome at the local level. Section 3 provides background on the Indonesian policy context. I then describe my research methods and data collection strategy in Section 4 before turning to my qualitative comparisons across three districts in Yogyakarta in Section 5 and presenting the results of the WUA survey in Section 6. In the conclusion, I discuss the implications of these findings.

2. POLITICS, BUREAUCRATS, AND PARTICIPATORY POLICY IMPLEMENTATION

Building local organizations necessary for participatory management of common pool resources is a complex developmental task. While researchers have identified some of the conditions and principles necessary for such groups (Agrawal, 2003; Araral, 2009; Ostrom, 1992), these approaches can neglect the politics that shape state actions regarding participatory organizations (Mollinga, 2008; Mollinga & Bolding, 2004). In this section I first briefly describe the challenges states face in building participatory organizations. This highlights the vital role of bureaucracies and especially street-level bureaucrats (Lipsky, 2010; Suhardiman & Giordano, 2014; Wade, 1992). I then argue the relevance of local political contexts in shaping the incentive structures of officials who implement participatory policies.

Participatory organizations are difficult for states to build because they run contrary to the incentive structure and organizational culture of centralized bureaucracies (Grindle, 1997;

Quarles van Ufford, 1988; Scott, 1998). This is especially true of irrigation agencies, which often adopt a “hydraulic mission” or bureaucratic identity prioritizing large infrastructure projects rather than reforms necessary for participatory management (Molle, Mollinga, & Wester, 2009; Suhardiman & Giordano, 2014; Suhardiman *et al.*, 2014). Thus when state officials are charged with forming a participatory organization, implementation fails for a number of reasons including poor alignment with bureaucratic goals, high information and transaction costs, and the difficulty of measuring participatory outcomes (Lam, 1998; Pritchett & Woolcock, 2004; Ricks, 2015; Suhardiman, 2013, 2015). Thus, it should be unsurprising when state efforts to develop WUA fall short of expectations. In fact, we should anticipate finding more failed groups than successful ones.

Even so, we have examples in which state actors do coordinate and cooperate with farmer groups. Lam (1996, 2001) demonstrates that effective WUA in Taiwan emerged from a unique institutional milieu in which local irrigation officials have strong incentives to work closely with farmers. Officials live in the communities they serve, they face community pressure, and they interact daily with the farmers who use irrigation. This social embeddedness of officials contributes to the strength and effectiveness of the organizations (see also Evans, 1995; Moore, 1989). Tandler (1997) found similar outcomes among extension agents in Brazil wherein the officials’ performance was conditioned on their relationship with service recipients. Street-level bureaucrats that develop a rapport with those they serve produce better policy outcomes because their implementation efforts are better directed at the local needs (Oorthuizen, 2003; van der Zaag, 1992; Wade, 1992).

Thus, if farmer–agency interface is so important (Suhardiman & Giordano, 2014), what conditions create incentives for street-level bureaucrats to develop close relationships with service recipients? Here I suggest that we must pay closer attention to the role of politicians. While bureaucracies can, at times, have independent missions and interests, their ultimate incentive structures are set by politicians who control the purse strings (Huber & Shipan, 2002). Drawing again on the findings of Tandler (1997), the effectiveness of civil servants arose not only from their relationship with service recipients; it was also conditioned on the incentives, pressures, and praise they received from politicians (Lipsky, 2010; McCubbins, Noll, & Weingast, 1989; Moe, 1984).

Politicians, though, react to their own incentive structure. Their main motivation is to remain in office, but being a political leader is time-consuming. They cannot address all policy issues that require attention. Thus they will react most strongly and quickly to those policy issues that can threaten their tenure; otherwise they often allow the status quo bureaucracy to deal with policy issues as they appear (Besley & Burgess, 2002; Grindle & Thomas, 1991). In other words, demand-side constraints shape their incentives (Winters, Karim, & Martawardaya, 2014). Following this logic, I propose that when irrigation becomes salient to a politician’s success, he or she will exert control over the irrigation agency, incentivizing officials to engage more closely with farmers. This, in turn, should lead to better participatory outcomes.

Such pressures should be much more salient at the local level. A focus on irrigation is rarely a nationwide political strategy,¹ but locally it can be very important. Proponents of decentralization have argued that by bringing governance decisions closer to the people, service provision will improve through increased accountability and responsiveness (Bardhan, 2002; Diamond, 1999; Faguet, 2004). Thus

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