Interaction dynamics: The case of the water sector skills plan in South Africa

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ABSTRACT

Despite extensive and continuous efforts to strengthen the capacity of people, organizations and institutions, there is evidence of an increasing gap between the existing and required capacities within the water sector. Consensus seems to be emerging regarding the need for national strategies to improve water sector capacity development. This paper analyses the dynamics of actors' interactions and their characteristics (motivation, cognition and power) during the formulation and implementation of a specific capacity development strategy, namely the Water Sector Skills Plan (SSP) in South Africa. Based on the Contextual Interactive Theory and empirical findings, our analysis indicates slow progression and challenges with implementing the SSP, mainly due to the lack of consultation with key stakeholders during the formulation stage, a lack of data sharing among the target group (the Sector Education Training Authorities), and a lack of capacities within the key implementing organizations. These policy dynamics need to be taken into account when advocating for national capacity development strategies as a solution for challenges with water sector capacity development. The paper proposes the recommendations that are of relevance for the SSP as well as similar initiatives in other countries.

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1. Introduction

While developing countries have differing institutional challenges with implementing water policy, ineffective water management and inefficiency in general operations are a common phenomenon (Mugabi, Kayaga, & Njiru, 2007). The lack of relevant knowledge and capacity has been highlighted as one of the major causes for challenges with the implementation of water policies (Akoojee, 2012; Alaerts & Kaspersma, 2009; Wehn de Montalvo & Alaerts, 2013). Despite extensive and continuous efforts to strengthen the capacity of people, organisations and institutions (Wehn de Montalvo & Alaerts, 2013), there is evidence of an increasing gap between the existing and required capacities within the water sector (Leidel, Niemann, & Hagemann, 2012). Calls for capacity development strategies have been made since 1991 (e.g. Alaerts, Blair, & Hartvelt, 1991) and consensus seems to be emerging among development banks, international organisations and state governments regarding the need for national strategies to improve water sector capacity development (IWA, 2014; MWE, 2012; Wertz, Odekova, & Seaman, 2011; Wehn de Montalvo & Alaerts, 2013). While coordinated strategies are being promoted as

solutions for improving the water sector's integrated performance, operationalising policy theory into practise seems to be an ongoing challenge (Rahaman & Varis, 2005).

The policy implementation process is complex, and synchronising the different organisations involved is considered by many to be the primary task at hand (Panday & Jamil, 2011). Among other factors, coordination is considered to be a key characteristic of effective governance and suggests that the processes of negotiation and dialogue in terms of capacity building are embedded in actor interactions (Bressers, 2004). The concept of actor interactions is useful in understanding issues surrounding integration in the water sector, allows for the scrutiny and analysis of the various actors' roles and influence, and raises questions concerning accountability (Tropp, 2007).

The focus of this paper is on the dynamics of actor interactions during the formulation and implementation of a capacity development strategy, namely the Water Sector Skills Plan (WSSP) in South Africa. Our analysis is based on empirical findings from selected actors (organisations) involved in the implementation of this plan. The objective of providing insights into the roles of the actors involved and their influence on national strategies for knowledge and capacity development (through the WSSP), is to show that the implementation of capacity development (CD) strategies is determined by the interactions that occur among the various relevant actors and that it is based on the influence of their

characteristics (motivation, cognition and power). The conceptualisation of motivation refers to assessing the origins of behaviour (individual or organisational) and the preferred stance or position in the actor interaction arena (de Boer, 2012). The second characteristic cognition is not the mere capacity of processing information, but it evolves over time and is produced through the mutual interactions among actors, which are dependent on their interpretations of reality and influenced by their own frames of reference (Bressers, 2004). Power, on the other hand, refers to resources in an interactive context, as it provides the capacity to act and to control other actors (de Boer, 2012; Owens, 2008).

This paper is structured as follows. Section 2 discusses relevant literature on policy implementation and theories on actor interactions and concludes with the delineation of the conceptual framework. Section 3 provides details of the adopted data collection methods for the empirical research. Section 4 elaborates on the results in context and in relation to actor interactions in the implementation process. Section 5 discusses the results with reference to relevant literature, and Section 6 presents the conclusions.

2. Theoretical context

2.1. The policy implementation process

Policy implementation is the stage between a policy's formulation and its effect on the goal it is intended to achieve (Brynard, 2009). Sabatier and Mazmanian (1980) argue that it is not a mere process, but rather a cycle which begins with the passing of a statute and continues with the decision by the implementing actors to implement the policy, the responses of the target groups, impacts resulting from the responses, and relevant revisions based on target group impacts or reactions. However, reactions to change and transition in policies always bring challenges, and a lack of awareness on the part of the public, industries and governmental leaders can pose a barrier to the process (Swanson, Kuhn, & Xu, 2001).

The development of guidelines, operational strategies, and the coordination and mobilisation of resources to achieve the intended goal, is a complex and ongoing process characterising the implementation of strategies such as national strategies for water sector capacity development (Wang & Ap, 2013). Both intra- and inter-organisational coordination is essential in order for policy implementation to be successful, yet in reality this rarely is fully realised, and the process is typically characterised by overlapping responsibilities and failure to meet objectives (Panday & Jamil, 2011). Interactions and interdependency among the various actors are at the core of policy implementation; as a result its success is dependent on coordination and cooperation (Brynard, 2009). Achieving a policy's intended outcome or fulfilling its intention is considered to be a success; however, this is often difficult to attain (Alesch & Petak, 2002; Brynard, 2009).

2.2. Conceptualisations of actor interaction processes in policy implementation

As discussed above, policy implementation inevitably involves the interaction of multiple actors (de Boer, 2012). A lack of coherence and fragmentation among policy-implementing organisations are challenges that have been raised by numerous researchers (Bressers, 2004; Dinar, 1998; Funke et al., 2007; Seppälä, 2002). The process of implementation has been unanimously concluded to be a socio-political process deeply rooted in the interactions of the actors involved (Bressers, 2004; Huitema et al., 2009; Medema, McIntosh, & Jeffrey, 2008; Tropp, 2007; Tortajada, 2010). The Contextual Interactive Theory (CIT) provides

a framework which seeks to explore and understand the different actors (both implementers and target group) and their different characteristics (motivation, information and power) (de Boer, 2012). These three characteristics are considered to be the main factors shaping the process of implementation. They, in turn, change over time and are reshaped by the same process (Bressers, 2007).

Ostrom developed a different framework, the Institutional Analysis Development framework (IAD). Like the CIT, Ostrom's IAD consists of an action arena in which the different actors interact in response to an exogenous environment; these interactions produce outcomes which in turn affect the actors and the manner in which they interact (Ostrom, 2005). Although the CIT and IAD are similar in their conceptualisation of these basic elements, the IAD is more resource-oriented, while the CIT is more concerned with actor interactions (Bressers, 2004). The IAD is conceptually rich, but unlike the CIT, its framework is based on institutional rules and is not focused on implementation (Owens, 2008).

2.3. Contextual interactive theory (CIT) framework

The CIT has been applied in previous studies to analyse various policy processes, including the South African energy sector (Hueso & Bell, 2013; Mohlakoana, 2014). Policy implementation is considered to be an arena of interaction between government officials and the target groups who can either implement, sabotage or change the policy, depending on their characteristics (motivation, power/resources and cognition) (Kotzebue, Bressers, & Yousif, 2010). We adopted the CIT for our study because it is focused on implementation and because of its potential to provide units of analysis that enable the fulfilment of the research objectives, namely the actor interaction dynamics, i.e., actor roles and influences based on the WSSP implementation process. The CIT considers that success or failure of improving water management in general and capacity development in particular is dependent on the interactions between organisations and individuals and that these interactions are based on the structure of existing institutions (Breeveld, Hermans, & Veenstra, 2013).

3. Methodology

We selected a single case study in order to provide in-depth insights into the overall implementation process of the water sector skills plan in South Africa. South Africa's selection was based on the fact that the country has a well-established national strategy for water sector capacity development. The so-called Water Sector Skills Plan, which is currently in the implementation phase, provided this research with a highly relevant setting in which to collect data, study and analyse the different actors in the implementation process of a capacity development strategy. The research further sought to establish the emerging types of actor interactions among the leading as well as the supporting authorities responsible for implementing the water sector skills plan, namely the Energy and Water Sector Training Authority (EWSETA), the Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET), the Department of Water Services (DWS), the Department of Corporate Governance and Traditional Affairs (COGTA), the Water Institute of Southern Africa (WISA), the Water Research Commission (WRC), the Local Government Sector Education Training Authority (LGSETA) and tertiary institutions selected for the purposes of this research.

In an effort to obtain relevant data, various data collection methods were used: semi-structured interviews, observations (gestures/implied responses based on actor characteristics), qualitative questionnaires and a review of secondary data. A total of 18 key informants were interviewed (see Table 1).