Geoforum 57 (2014) 78–90

Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Geoforum

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/geoforum

Governance struggles and policy processes in disaster risk reduction: A case study from Nepal

Samantha Jones [a,*], Katie J Oven [b], Bernard Manyena [a], Komal Aryal [a]

[a] Geography Department, Northumbria University, Newcastle NE1 8ST, United Kingdom
[b] Department of Geography and the Institute of Hazard, Risk and Resilience, Durham University, Science Laboratories, South Road, Durham DH1 3LE, United Kingdom

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:
Received 10 December 2013
Received in revised form 14 July 2014
Available online 15 September 2014

Keywords:
Disaster risk reduction
Nepal
Governance
Policy
Post-conflict
Stakeholders

ABSTRACT

In the neo-liberal climate of reduced responsibility for the state, alongside global platforms established to implement the Hyogo Framework for Action, a new arena opens for a multitude of stakeholders to engage in disaster risk reduction (DRR). The key role that the state can play in instituting effective DRR tends to receive little attention, yet in situations where the state apparatus is weak, such as in Nepal, it becomes evident that integrating DRR into development is a particularly challenging task. Due to the political situation in Nepal, progress has been stalled in providing a legislative context conducive to effective DRR. This paper traces the evolution of key DRR initiatives that have been developed in spite of the challenging governance context, such as the National Strategy for Disaster Risk Management and the Nepal Risk Reduction Consortium. Informed by in-depth interviews with key informants, the argument is made that the dedicated efforts of national and international non-governmental organisations, multilateral agencies and donors in mainstreaming DRR demonstrate that considerable progress can be made even where government departments are protective of their own interests and are slow to enact policies to support DRR. The paper suggests however, that without stronger engagement of key political actors the prospects for further progress in DRR may be limited. The findings have implications for other post-conflict countries or weak states engaging in DRR.

Introduction

It is evident that some governments have successfully adopted and implemented disaster risk reduction (DRR) policies, while others lag behind (Williams, 2011). The shortcomings in DRR are increasingly being regarded as a consequence of weak governance and lack of political will (Williams, 2011). Despite this, in the academic literature, little attention has been given to the processes of governance of DRR, such as the formulation of policy and the roles of different stakeholders. In addition there is a lack of evidence on the effectiveness of different governance systems (UNISDR, 2011). Ojha et al. (2009: 365) suggest that effective governance is particularly hindered by the complex interplay of power and knowledge among diverse groups of actors with unequal command over resources. In DRR, this complex interplay of power and knowledge among diverse stakeholder groups gives rise to different governance approaches. As a post-conflict country in the early stages of democracy with a weak system of governance, Nepal offers an interesting case study on DRR implementation. This paper aims to explore in depth, the governance struggles and policy processes in this post-conflict state in which numerous stakeholders are emerging to fill the 'gap' left by weak government apparatus.

A brief theoretical discussion on governance is presented below, followed by an account of the global context of DRR. Nepal's disaster, political and social context is then introduced and the methodology for the research undertaken is outlined. Drawing on key informant interviews, the discussion provides a critical overview of the policy processes and the governance of DRR. The conclusion reflects on the implications of the research for other post-conflict states and states where government responsibility is reducing as part of a neo-liberal agenda.

Governance

'Governance' refers to the actors, structures and processes by which societies share power and make collectively binding

* Corresponding author.
E-mail address: samantha.jones@northumbria.ac.uk (S. Jones).

http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.geoforum.2014.07.011
0016-7185/© 2014 The Authors. Published by Elsevier Ltd.

decisions (van Asselt and Renn, 2011: 431; Lebel et al., 2006: 2).[1] According to Goodwin (1998) adopting a 'governance perspective' entails giving attention to the distribution of political power both internal and external to the state. The distribution of power between state and non-state actors has changed significantly over the last twenty years, as a consequence of neoliberal economic and political restructuring. This is often referred to as the shift from 'government to governance'. Before discussing the nature of this shift further a brief introduction to neoliberalism is presented.

Neoliberalism and the redistribution of state functions

Neoliberalism has a complex history and has been ascribed different meanings by rival groups of political economists throughout the 20th century (Gane, 2012).[2] In a broad sense, it involves a (re)negotiation of the boundaries between the market, the state, and civil society so that more areas of people's lives are governed by an economic logic, as the market is regarded to be the best mechanism for allocating goods and services to meet the diverse needs of actors across the globe (Castree, 2008). A popular notion of neoliberalism is that it is a laissez-faire political and economic culture which demands government and the state to be limited in their power to intervene in the market or in the entrepreneurial activities of individuals (Gane, 2012).[3] Castree (2008) refers to neoliberalism as "the fetishising of markets as forms of social organization".[4] One of the processes popularly associated with neoliberalisation is deregulation. This entails the scaling back of states and their capacity to regulate (Igoe and Brockington, 2007) and interfere in areas of social and environmental life (Castree, 2008), as well as the rolling back of redistributive reforms of the mid-twentieth century that were implemented in most advanced industrial economies (Castree, 2008 citing Harvey, 1989). This has resulted in an 'off-loading' of responsibilities to the private sector and/or civil society groups (Castree, 2008).

For Bulkeley and Jordan (2012) the 'hollowing out' or 'rolling back' of the nation state has given rise to a situation whereby its functions are redistributed 'upwards' to international institutions, 'downwards' to regional and local tiers of authority [decentralisation],[5] and 'outwards' to a range of non-state actors. Thus, state boundaries have become more politically and economically permeable to decisions and flows emanating from diverse, overlapping and integrated networks of power which operate beyond effective control by formal structures of government (Bulkeley and Jordan, 2012; Goodwin, 1998). The messiness and scope of this complexity raises questions concerning legitimacy and power (Goodwin, 1998) which have implications for DRR governance.

NGOs and the 'outwards' redistribution of 'state' functions

Non-governmental organisations (NGOs) have found a new place within the neoliberal global order in terms of the 'outwards' redistribution of state functions (Frewer, 2013).[6] NGOs are an extremely diverse group of independent organisations that are neither run by government nor driven by profit (Lewis and Kanji, 2009).[7] Poorer countries receiving official development assistance have seen an increased proportion of aid being channelled to and through NGOs (Suleiman, 2013, citing Edwards and Hulme, 1996; Wallace et al., 1997) as part of the shift from government to governance, meaning not only have they proliferated in number, but their relative position has increased in relation to the state (Bebbington, 2005).[8] Lewis and Kanji (2009: 5) attribute the rise of the NGO against the ascendancy of the neoliberal policy agendas to their high degree of flexibility in institutional form and the wide spectrum of values. International donors have tended to view national and international NGOs as being more efficient than governmental actors as: they tend to work at the grassroots level with poorer and more marginalised groups adopting participatory approaches; they have principled motivations, clear mission and objectives, progressive development agendas and lower overhead costs (Suleiman, 2013; Davis and Murdie, 2012; Benson et al., 2001; Hulme and Edwards, 1997; Lewis and Kanji, 2009). NGOs are often seen as synonymous with, or representative of, 'civil society', acting as a pluralist counterweight to state power (Frewer, 2013; Benson et al., 2001).

However, the enthusiasm towards NGOs as a vehicle for development has for a long time been under scrutiny within academia (Frewer, 2013). NGOs tend to reflect and reproduce both the hierarchies of the societies in which they are embedded, such as neo-patrimonial networks, clientelism, corruption and inequality (Frewer, 2013; Suleiman, 2013; O'Reilly, 2010). Thus where the legitimacy of poor country governments is questionable, their civil societies may be equally disenfranchised, deeply divided, and ill

[1] 'Governance' is used in both a descriptive and a normative sense (Renn et al., 2011). In a descriptive sense, it refers to the complex web of manifold interactions between heterogeneous actors pertaining to a particular policy domain (Renn et al., 2011). In a normative sense, 'good governance' is an umbrella term for any package of public sector reforms or actions in civil society designed to create lasting and positive changes in accordance with the principles of: participation, representation, deliberation, accountability, empowerment, predictability, coherence, social justice, and organisation features (Renn et al., 2011; Ahrens and Rudolph, 2006; Lebel et al., 2006). Good governance in the context of disaster risk reduction includes the adoption and promotion of robust and sound policies, legislation, coordination mechanisms and regulatory frameworks, and the creation of an enabling environment that is characterized by appropriate decision making processes to allow effective participation of stakeholders, complemented by the appropriate allocation of resources (WMO, 2012).

[2] It is beyond the scope of this paper to consider these in depth (see Peck, 2008, for such as discussion – cited by Gane, 2012).

[3] According to Medina (2010), a neoliberal rationality of government departs from classical liberalism on two key points. First, rather than proposing that the state limit its interventions into markets, neoliberalism proposes that the market form itself should serve as "the organizational principle for the state" (citing Lemke, 2001:200). In a more Foucauldain reading of neoliberal ideology, neoliberalism addresses the appropriate powers of the state and the role it should play in ensuring the freedom of the market (Gane, 2012) which may entail "a constant push to define and regulate social life through principles that come from the market" (Gane, 2012). Many conceive of neoliberalism then, as a reorganisation of the role and practices of the state in relation to the economy, not a decline in state power (MacNeil and Paterson, 2012).

[4] Castree (2008) highlights 'ideal-type characterisations' of neoliberalism as including privatization, marketisation, degregulation, re-regulation and the creation of market proxies. Of most relevance to this paper is the characterisation he refers to as "the construction of flanking mechanisms in civil society" which relates to the encouragement of charities, NGOs, 'communities' etc to provide services that interventionist states have provided in the past.

[5] This is not considered in depth as it is beyond the scope of this paper but is intended to form the basis of future work.

[6] A considerable proportion of donor funding now by-passes the state. Multilateral aid (channelled for example to the UN) stands at around 30% of official development assistance (OECD, 2010). It is argued that multilateral aid may be more effective than bilateral aid due to economies of scale, political neutrality and legitimacy, large scale of capital and knowledge resources, lower unit costs, and the provision of public goods. On the other hand institutional complexity, procedures which can be cumbersome or time-consuming, lack of transparency, higher absolute costs and salaries, remoteness and lack of accountability characterise multilateral institutions (OECD, 2010).

[7] NGOs play very different roles and take different shapes and forms within and across different country contexts. In terms of structure, NGOs may be large or small formal or informal, flexible or bureaucratic. In terms of values, NGOs may be secular or faith based, vehicles for progressive change or may be regarded as part of market solutions to policy problems. They may play roles as implementers (goods and services, delivery role, contracted to provide specific tasks); catalysts (inspire, facilitate or contribute to promote change – lobbying, advocacy, research, policy influence) and partners (with government, donors, private sector, building capacity) (Lewis and Kanji, 2009).

[8] In line with the neo-liberal agenda, there has been an increase in bilateral funding through NGOs and national multilateral agencies (such as the UN operating in specific countries) thereby decreasing direct funding to the state. For example, the funds that have been delivered through national multilateral agencies and NGOs rose from 30% in 2007/8 to 51% in 2011/12 (UKAid, 2012). This has led to a proliferation of stakeholders engaged in DRR.