



Original Research Article

The research and practice of integrating conservation and development: Self-reflections by researchers on methodologies, objectives and influence



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ABSTRACT

This study examines the application of mixed-method and participatory approaches to conservation and development research. Both approaches were applied in a research project on the relationship between ecosystem governance and the wellbeing of local communities adjacent to a protected area in Laos. By encouraging four of the involved field researchers to reflect upon and expose their practical approaches as scientific experts (in terms of methodologies, objectives, reliability of results and research influence), this article aims to improve our learning from research practice and to promote reflexivity in research. The reflexive study presented here emphasizes the social and political context or real world situation against which research outputs can and should be evaluated, and retrospectively sheds light on the barriers to reach research objectives. In essence, the article addresses the relation between science and policy, and underlines the political undercurrent of conservation and development research in facilitating institutional change. The article outlines the very role of researchers in developing conservation policies, and provides a foundation for institutions and individual researchers to promote critical and constructive self-reflections in scientific practices.

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1. Introduction: the politics of conservation and development research practice

Nature conservation and development goals have increasingly merged on the international scene (Miller, 2014) illustrated by the emergence of Payment for Ecosystem Services (PES) and Reduced Emission from Deforestation and Degradation (REDD+) schemes, trickling down to national and sub-national scale projects, and blending with decentralized and participatory management initiatives in Protected Areas (e.g. Balooni and Lund, 2014; Pasgaard and Mertz, 2016; Sils et al., 2014). Academic scholars are trying to keep up with progress through a plethora of research projects and publications, some with an explicit but hotly debated agenda of facilitating institutional change (Castree, 2015a,b; Cornell et al., 2013; Milkoreit et al., 2015; Thiel et al., 2015). This debate puts into question the role of science, scientists and research practices

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in conservation and development politics; a complicated question which has been debated and addressed empirically by scholars across fields.

Such debates about science and scientists facilitating institutional change are rooted in a long-standing (cf. Gieryn, 1983; Hoppe, 2005) and ongoing (e.g. Milkoreit et al., 2015; Naem et al., 2015) struggle about the perceived boundaries between science and policy. Construction of such a boundary is useful for scientists' acquisition of intellectual authority and for the protection of the autonomy of scientific research from political interference, even if this boundary can be claimed not to exist in reality (Gieryn, 1983). Factors which influence the science–policy interface include the extent to which science is integrated into the solutions to public problems, such as forest protection and poverty alleviation, and how, when, by whom as well as *who* will frame those public problems in the first place (Jasanoff, 2005). Thus, there are boundary conflicts over where the role of science ends and that of politics or policy begins, and deeply embedded in these conflicts are the scientific experts, who translate between the different domains (Berling and Bueger, 2015). Such experts are increasingly expected to manage heterogeneous bodies of knowledge and offer balanced opinions in decision-making processes, and with the shift from producing knowledge to providing recommendations, they have become indispensable to the politics of nations, and indeed to transnational and global politics (Jasanoff, 2005), such as conservation and development schemes and projects.

In a recent themed issue, Lund and colleagues empirically explore the politics of expertise and the “professionalization” of participatory forestry (Green and Lund, 2015; Lund, 2015). The authors shed light on science and expertise of participatory forestry *implementers*, namely forestry bureaucrats and social elites of forest adjacent communities, and on the inequity of the professionalization they promote. However, the authors do not address scientific expertise and practices performed by researchers like *themselves*. Still within forest conservation, Tania Li (2007) uncovers the role of different types of development experts or “trustees” who diagnose disorders and prescribe the needed protective interventions, and she also examines the active agency and influence of involved scientists across disciplines. In development research, scholars such as Bierschenk and De Sardan (2014), Goldman (2005), Mitchell (2002), and Mosse (2011) all critically explore the role of “intermediary” actors, so-called brokers or translators of development, or development experts (see also Pasgaard, 2015, on community-based forest protection in Cambodia). The actors under investigation are typically Northern-based NGO workers, government officials or local authorities, some of whom, according to these scholars, exploit their powerful positions and modify projects to serve self-interests. With special focus on participation, Cornwall (2008), Evans et al. (2006) and others critically discuss the meanings and practices of participatory approaches in terms of potential misuse and political aspects, and Cooke and Kothari (2001) even go as far as to condemn the “tyranny of participation”, claiming that participatory approaches can lead to injustice and illegitimate exercise of power by advocates of development, who misuse its attractive rhetoric by imposing their own ideological biases on the research methods, results and therefore the institutional outcomes their research contributes to.

1.1. A reflexive gap?

Common for most of these contributions across fields is their dominant focus on the conservation and development *practitioners* (e.g. the NGO aid workers, the agroforestry experts, the local bureaucrats or elites), contrasted by their limited attention to *academic researchers* like themselves, who indeed also influence practice and policies (Martin et al., 2012). This limited attention is indicative of the concern shared by some (mainly political) scholars about the role and implications of scientific expertise in policies; a role, which they claim remains under-researched (Berling, 2011) and occupies a “shadowy place” (Jasanoff, 2005). This concern is particularly evident for environmental science as compared to fields like security studies, where scientific expertise and practice are being studied to a greater extent (e.g. Berling and Bueger, 2015; Kurowska and Tallis, 2013), possibly because of the traditional apolitical and positivistic nature of investigating “the environment” (e.g. Forsyth, 2011; Neumann, 2005). Calls to integrate reflexivity into for instance livelihoods research have been made (Prowse, 2010), suggestions to add self-ethnography in development practice have been aired (Mosse, 2005), and debates challenging conservationists to be explicit about their hard choices have been raised (McShane et al., 2011). However, such practical reflections from conservation and development researchers are largely missing or merely feature as good intentions (Cornell et al., 2013, p. 61) with very little concrete details (however, for an inspiring reflexive dialogue on the role of geographers in the politics of knowledge on global environmental change, see Castree (2015a, b)).

Our study addresses this reflexive gap by exploring how researchers bring the plural perspectives of ecosystem services (ES) and wellbeing studies into conservation and development practice to facilitate institutional change. The aim of this exercise is dual, since we both seek to improve what we can learn from our own research and the (institutional) changes we make, and because we wish to promote reflexivity among other actors; hence, reflexivity is both a mean and end in itself. Empirically, we compare two different approaches to conservation and development research from the researchers' points of view, namely mixed-methods approaches and a participatory approach. These two approaches were applied together and designed to complement one another in a research project in Laos. In other words, this article aims to investigate research practices in conservation and development from the perspective of the researchers themselves, in particular concerning their reflections on the potential impact of their work in the face of contextual barriers.

This paper is organized into five main sections. Following this introduction, the second section outlines the conceptual frame structured around and inspired by notions of boundary work and practical reflexivity.¹ The third section presents the

¹ Following Berling and Bueger (forthcoming), we think of practical reflexivity both as a tool for considering biases or limits of research, and as a way of thinking (back) on how science is embedded in practical situations, i.e. post-fieldwork in this case.

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