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The Kaleidoscope Model of policy change: Applications to food security policy in Zambia

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ABSTRACT

What drives policy reform after long periods of policy inertia? What factors shape the effectiveness of policy implementation following reform decisions? These questions increasingly concern the international donor and research communities, given the importance of policy environments in shaping development outcomes and the growing need to achieve development impact with scarce resources. To address these questions, this paper introduces the Kaleidoscope Model of policy change. Inductively derived from empirical examples in developing countries, political economy literature, and theoretical scholarship on the policy process, the model proposes a set of 16 operational hypotheses to identify the conditions under which policies emerge on the agenda and ultimately are implemented. The paper tests the model empirically in Zambia by evaluating eight policy reform episodes related to agricultural input subsidies and vitamin A fortification. Empirical application and hypothesis testing rely on rigorous process tracing using secondary sources and semi-structured interviews with a purposive sample of 58 stakeholders in Zambia. In the policy reforms studied, a majority of the KM's core variables proved robust across the two distinct policy domains, while a handful emerged as relevant only episodically. In an era of growing pressure on donor resources and government budgets, the Kaleidoscope Model offers a practical framework through which practitioners and researchers can assess when and where investments in policy reforms are most feasible given a country's underlying political, economic, and institutional characteristics.

1. Introduction

The "results-based agenda" that emerged more than a decade ago in the wake of the Millennium Development Goals and the Paris Declaration for Aid Effectiveness has resulted in growing donor demands to achieve and measure policy impact (OECD, 2014; Ravallion, 2009; White, 2014). As the development community transitions towards the Sustainable Development Goals, achieving meaningful and timely policy impact undoubtedly will become even more important. Motivations include improved accountability to donor country taxpayers and increased responsiveness to the needs of developing country citizens. Yet, policy impact requires an informed understanding of the nuances of pol-icymaking processes to recognize the opportunities for, and feasibility of, generating intended reforms.

Interest in policy processes has given rise to several distinct bodies of literature and experience in policy systems, each with important strengths but also some shortfalls. Academic theories about public policy and political economy provide a rich and nuanced perspective on policy change (Birkland, 2010; Cairney & Heikkila, 2014; Weible, 2014). Yet, such theories collectively identify many relevant variables in the policy process, which provides little guidance for engagement by practitioners. A meta-analysis of the public policy literature conducted 30 years ago revealed more than 100 variables advanced by scholars to explain drivers of policy implementation alone (O'Toole, 1986). Since then, further proliferation of variables has led sceptics to dismiss the value of policy process analysis as too context-specific and not rigorous enough to uncover generalizable findings (Goodin, Rein, & Moran, 2006; Meier, 2009; Smith & Larimer, 2017).

Outside the academic arena, donors have likewise recognized the importance of understanding policy and political processes in

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developing countries. At least 27 donor agencies have adopted some type of political economy framework (Resnick & van de Walle, 2013). However, many of these frameworks are narrowly oriented to specific sectors or programs (Eaton, Kaiser, & Smoke, 2010; Fritz, Levy Ort, 2014). In terms of engagement on the ground, donor-led reform efforts implicitly have relied on a handful of common approaches to generate behavioral change among policy makers, such as policy conditionality and more recently "mutual accountability." These highly focused approaches respectively assume that policy change depends on a combination of carrots and sticks, or espoused commitments to ostensibly shared policy agendas and targets (OECD, 2016). Such standardized views risk obscuring the complexities of policymaking both across and within countries.

This paper draws together evidence and experience from the academic and donor communities to develop a practical and holistic framework for analyzing the policy process in developing country contexts. Known as the Kaleidoscope Model (KM), the framework draws on actual episodes of policy change from the public administration, political science, and international development experiences to inductively derive a set of variables likely to prove important across multiple policy arenas and country settings. Although applicable to a broad range of policies, this paper empirically applies the KM to public policies related to food security. Specifically, we focus on eight episodes of policy change across two very different domains of food security policy in Zambia: agricultural input subsidy programs (ISPs) and vitamin A fortification.

The following section introduces the KM. Thereafter, we follow an approach used by public policy scholars (e.g. Baumgartner & Jones, 1993; Sabatier & Jenkins-Smith, 1993a) by empirically testing the KM on a set of cases distinct from those used to derive the framework. The discussion summarizes which KM variables proved most robust based on the Zambian case studies. The conclusion offers implications of the KM for advancing cross-country comparative policy process research and identifying opportunities for policy engagement.

2. The Kaleidoscope Model of policy change

The Kaleidoscope Model (KM) explicitly focuses on understanding formal manifestations of public policy, defined by Birkland (2010) as the decisions of government that are codified in statutes, laws, regulations, government programs, and executive decisions.[1] Like Sabatier (1998), we recognize that policy change manifests in major spurts involving a wholesale reorientation (e.g. introducing a national health insurance scheme) as well as in more minor, instrumental changes (e.g. altering tax rates to fund the scheme or expanding the scope of services covered). We refer to both types of policy changes as "policy reform episodes."

The KM was inductively constructed following a "synthetic" analytic approach (Cairney, 2013) that combines existing academic and donor perspectives on policy change with empirical findings from case studies of reform in developing countries. In doing so, a core set of 16 variables is distilled across this diverse scholarship that repeatedly constitute proximate drivers of policy change in a broad range of low-income countries and policy settings. The inner circle of Fig. 1 highlights these core variables. Following other work (Fox & Reich, 2013; Kaufman & Nelson, 2004), they are organized according to five stages of the policy cycle: agenda setting, design, adoption, implementation, and evaluation and reform. While acknowledging that the policy process is iterative and nonlinear

(Sabatier, 2007), most existing theories and studies on policy process implicitly focus on one or more of these stages (deLeon, 1999; Howlett, Ramesh, & Perl, 2009). Thus, the stages serve as a heuristic device to emphasize which variables take precedence at different stages rather than as a predictive theory positing that policymaking occurs in a teleological manner.

In turn, numerous contextual conditions are delineated in the middle ring of Fig. 1. They are not an exhaustive list on their own; instead, they are intended to illustrate, based on accumulated scholarship, the vast range of factors that have been identified over the years as relevant to influencing the inner circle. These contextual conditions have a strong affinity to certain elements of the policy process, which is emphasized by their placement in Fig. 1. However, the lack of borders between the policy stages for the middle ring emphasizes that this affinity is not exclusive and that certain contextual factors may indeed be relevant at multiple points in the process.

The KM is a framework rather than a theory. As Ostrom (2007: 25) notes, "Frameworks organize diagnostic and prescriptive inquiry…They attempt to identify the universal elements that any theory relevant to the same kind of phenomena would need to include." The KM is probabilistic and correlative, suggesting that the presence (or absence) of a particular variable is more (or less) likely to explain policy change. Repeated empirical testing, guided by some of the tools presented here, will provide greater confidence regarding which of the 16 variables tend to be more consistently important and take precedence over others. The rest of this section describes the framework in greater depth.

2.1. Agenda setting

Why do certain issues emerge on the policy agenda while others do not? Three common explanatory variables recur in the literature. First, policy needs to address a *recognized, relevant problem* for key segments of the country's population (Kingdon, 1984, 1995). The relevance criterion narrows the range of policy issues that could potentially emerge on the agenda because only certain problems will resonate with decision makers. In turn, contextual conditions, such as a country's level of poverty or macroeconomic performance, shapes the resonance of specific issues (Binswanger & Deininger, 1997). For instance, in those countries where chronic undernutrition emerged on the policy agenda in recent years, one of the most influential factors was clear evidence on the size and urgency of the problem (Pelletier et al., 2012).

Yet, a relevant problem rarely engenders a policy intervention on its own. A second variable is the occurrence of a *focusing event*. The policy literature has referred to such events as "critical junctures" (Collier & Collier, 1991), "punctuated equilibria" (Pierson, 2004; Thelen, 2003), or "windows of opportunity" (Kingdon, 1984, 1995). In all cases, they refer to a non-routinized but time-delimited event that has the capacity to significantly alter the options available to policy makers. A focusing event may be a major food or price crisis, an economic collapse, regime change, or a natural disaster (Birkland, 1997). The urgency of such events, such as the 2007–2008 food price crisis, may close off certain policy options and thus require exploration of new policy instruments (see Pinstrup-Andersen, 2015). In other cases, focusing events may include high-level international summits or declarations that elevate the status of certain policy issues and diminish others (e.g. the Maputo declaration on agriculture or the Rio + 20 initiative for sustainable development). In still other cases, a focusing event may refer to major scientific breakthroughs and technological changes since these re-define what is feasible and shift the constellation of policy advocates (Weible, 2014).

Finally, *powerful advocates* play a key role in pushing for action. Given that countries confront multiple problems simultaneously,

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[1] In other words, we are not looking at informal public policies, such as the implied rules that govern interactions of public officials, such as in city councils or legislatures (see Schneider & Ingram, 1997).