Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

World Development

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

Peopling policy processes? Methodological populism in the Bangladesh health and education sectors

David Lewis *

London School of Economics & Political Science, UK

A B S T R A C T

Policy makers are frequently characterized as being out of touch with the communities they serve. But closing the "gap" between policy makers and people is not straightforward, since distancing effects are produced by a combination of geography, politics and knowledge. This article analyses the case of an experimental initiative in Bangladesh known as the "reality check" that attempted to influence policy makers in the health and education sectors by providing them with people-centered data gathered at community level. The case is analyzed as an example of "methodological populism" that combined participatory and ethnographic approaches, and as one that challenged current managerialist cultures of what can be considered as acceptable evidence for policy. The case highlights tensions between participation, populism and policy that are potentially productive but constrained by three sets of factors: (i) contestations over the status of "popular knowledge", (ii) the need for critical "policy spaces" within policy processes in which policy makers can engage with such knowledge, and (iii) the "disruptive temporalities" within policy processes that tend to inhibit learning. Drawing on the "guarded hopefulness" of meta-modernist theory, the paper concludes that if more attention can be paid to such issues, initiatives informed by methodological populism such as the reality check could be further built upon in ways that may contribute to the humanization or "peopling" of policy processes.

© 2018 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

1. Introduction

A persistent theme in the history of international development – and within the analysis of policy making and implementation processes more widely – is the problem of the insulation of so called "policy makers"[1] from the realities faced by the people whose problems their policies are supposed to address. Indeed Chambers (2009, p. 1) has suggested that "(e)nabling people who live in poverty to analyze their realities, articulate their priorities, and have effective voice to influence policies, is one of the most pressing and most neglected issues of our time". Yet the past decade has seen development agencies become less interested in the human and social aspects of development and more concerned with approach-

ing development as a technical and managerial process (Gulrajani, 2011; Wallace & Porter, 2013).

More emphasis is instead given to the management and delivery of aid and to the measurement of the "impact" of interventions than to understanding the social, political and human dimensions of the lives of people who live in poverty (Eyben, 2013). The Development Assistance Committee (DAC) countries are once again prioritizing growth over poverty reduction, and there is a general trend towards favoring a stronger role in development for the private sector (Mawdsley, 2017; Nagaraj, 2015). One consequence of this shift is that a higher proportion of international aid is now processed through private sector management consultants and accountancy firms whose core expertise is more focused on delivery, information systems and cost-benefit analysis than on social or human development. For example, the UK Department for International Development's (DFID) spending through private sector contractors increased from 12% in 2010/11 to 22% in 2015/16 (House of Commons, 2017).[2]

---

* Address: Department of Social Policy, London School of Economics & Political Science, Houghton St, London WC2A 2AE, UK.
   E-mail address: d.lewis@lse.ac.uk

[1] The term "policy maker" is commonly used by academics to describe the expected audience for implementation recommendations arising from research. It has a problematic lack of precision since it refers to a wide range of people, from elite politicians to street level bureaucrats (Lewis, 2012a). In the context of the reality check discussed here it refers to high-level government personnel, international donor staff, and senior program planners.

[2] The UK House of Commons International Development Committee recently raised concerns about the quality of DFID's oversight of the supply chain and the "appalling conduct of some contractors" (House of Commons, 2017).

Policy makers usually live urban lives close to their offices and homes in capital cities, far away from the people living in the villages and towns affected by their decisions. Visits to the field are infrequent, formal and brief if they happen at all. The problem that Chambers (1981) described four decades ago as "rural development tourism" has persisted, fed further by the managerial turn in development administration and increasingly also by growing concerns about security (Stoddard et al., 2011). Ann Coles (2007, p. 140) in her "Portrait of an Aid Donor" describes the declining frequency of field visits within the UK's Department for International Development (DFID) from the 1990s onwards "which older staff remember with nostalgia" in favor of donor coordination meetings and regular trips to the Ministry of Finance in the capital cities of developing countries. More recently in an article in *The Foreign Service Journal*, Tom Dichter comments that during a study that took him to fourteen different USAID country offices around the world "it became clear how insulated agency staff have become from the countries in which they work" (Dichter, 2016).

The problem of remoteness is not purely geographical, but also political. While the diversity of actors involved in policy-making has broadened beyond the state to also include civil society groups, development donors, intergovernmental agencies and non-governmental organizations (NGOs), the policy process itself remains dominated by elites. This "pluralist elitism" (Gaventa, 2004, p. 297) is a second factor that means that policy decisions continue to be made in institutional spaces that are located far away from the everyday worlds of people who find themselves on the "receiving end" of policy. Furthermore, a gradual policy shift away from donor-funded projects on the ground in favor of forms of "upstream" programmatic planning and implementation technologies such as "sector wide approaches" (SWAPs) – particularly since the 2005 Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) Paris Declaration on Aid Effectiveness – has meant that the problem of remoteness has become more acute.

A third set of issues relates to the nature of the information obtained and used by policy makers. The type of impersonal data produced by the information systems on which policy makers mostly rely further distances them from ordinary lives. Monitoring and evaluation has become heavily focused on quantitative measures (in the effort to determine impact and ascertain measurable outcomes) and financial data (to assess "value for money") rather than on forms of information that capture everyday experience or human perception. Quantitative approaches can be effective at capturing the material dimensions of developmental change but tend to be less adequate when it comes to engaging with issues of rights, power and voice (Fukada-Parr, 2013). Furthermore, Copestake and Remnant (2014) have drawn attention to "the limitations of a positivist approach to improving development in the face of overwhelming contextual complexity and multiple stakeholder interests that spawn diverse and competing interpretations of what constitutes credible and useful evidence" (p. 19). While systematic technical approaches for establishing the effectiveness and the cost of interventions are clearly important, there is a risk that we end up with a narrow base of knowledge where the forms of information that are available to policy makers to draw upon as "evidence" fail to adequately capture the diversity of voices at community level.

These methodological preferences are not just technical. They reflect a dominant ideology that privileges certain forms of knowledge over others, in ways that are as much about institutional control as about open-ended enquiry. According to Greene (2009) this has increasingly taken the form of positivist monoculture that primarily serves the interests of elites with profoundly anti-democratic implications. Greene's (2009, p. 15) response to the problem is a call to build "an alternative view on credible evidence that meaningfully honors complexity, and more modestly views

evidence as 'inkling' in contrast to 'proof'". This she suggests might enable us to do more justice to the messy complexity of ordinary people's experiences, respect diversity and difference, and provide scope for improving "democratic inclusion" and listening to "multiple voices".[3] As Adams and Biehl (2016, p. 124) have argued, evidence making is "an ethical and political proposition that knowledge can come in many forms and be distinctively mobilized". Both the generation and the use of evidence is "entangled with politics" (Jerven, 2013, p. 130).

This paper seeks to contribute to debates around the use of evidence by reflecting critically on a five-year experiment known as the "Bangladesh health and education reality check". Established by the Swedish Embassy in Dhaka and by Sida headquarters in Stockholm, the project gathered a form of participatory, ethnographic policy knowledge that was constructed from informal conversations and observations with service users at community level. The aim was to supplement with new people-centered data the formal monitoring systems that had been established within two large sector-wide reform programs designed to strengthen the country's health and education sectors. The purpose was to provide the Embassy with "the perspectives and experience of people living in poverty on primary education and health access" so that this information could be used to support the Embassy "in its policy dialogues with government and its development partners" (Pain, Nycander, & Islam, 2013, p. 8). Using this distinctive and unconventional form of policy knowledge, the initiative hoped to bridge the gap between the multiple policy makers engaged in the implementation of these sector reforms, and the local people who were being affected by them.

The reality check's approach used to collect this information was, at least in theory, relatively simple. Over a five-year period specially trained field teams made short annual residential visits to a selection of households around the country and lived with them for five days, listening, observing and learning about their lives and experiences in relation to changes in local health and education services. The information gathered by the teams was documented as simply as possible and then written up into an Annual Report. These reports were discussed each year with a Reference Group made up of relevant policy makers in health education (drawn from government, donors and civil society) and then presented each year to the members of the donor consortium. The aim was to inform and influence those responsible for managing the programs using this supplementary form of data in ways that would either enable small changes and course corrections to be made within implementation processes, or prompt further investigation using the programs' formal monitoring systems, and/or through commissioning in-depth research.

The project was therefore based on a form of "methodological populism"[4] that drew on both participatory and ethnographic traditions (Mosse & Lewis, 2006). It aimed to show the potential for "humanizing" policy processes in its effort to supplement formal measurement and numbers with people's experiences and stories.

2. Approach and methodology

The analysis presented in this paper draws primarily on knowledge gained as an adviser to the project for its duration. This position offered the opportunity for a participant observation role that

---

[3] New approaches to evaluation have begun to pay more attention to equity issues (see for example Segone, 2011).

[4] This can be distinguished from two other modes of anthropological engagement: (i) critical "deconstructivist" approaches, such as Escobar's (1995) view of development primarily as a discourse of power imposed by the West, and (ii), "instrumental" approaches in the form of conventional applied development work (Mosse & Lewis, 2006).