



How environmental NGOs have influenced decision making in a ‘semi-authoritarian’ state: The case of forest policy in Ethiopia



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ABSTRACT

Much has been written about the increasing contributions of non-governmental actors, such as environmental NGOs (ENGOS), to sustainable development, particularly in forest and environmental governance. However, little empirical evidence exists concerning the role and impact of these new actors in policy decisions where pluralist politics are lacking. By presenting the case of forest policy-making in Ethiopia, this paper illustrates the strategies of ENGOS, and how and to what extent they have impacted policy decisions, in a ‘semi-authoritarian’ context, where public policies are typically the exclusive mandate of governmental actors. We applied the policy arrangement approach (PAA), enriched with an ENGO classification, to analyze and explain the dynamics and nuances of policy processes. Our study finds that ENGOS do have an influence on policy-making under ‘semi-authoritarianism’, even without being formally invited to do so. However, influencing policy under such circumstances requires a circumspect approach and follows more complex pathways than the conventional policy-making steps in a democratic context. When the formal avenue for their participation in the policy-making process is restricted, these actors employ indirect strategies of catalyzing policy processes, such as demonstrating innovative policy approaches by implementing pilot projects, documenting and communicating field evidence and best practices, forming strong networks with like-minded actors, forging alliances with key decision makers, and investing sufficient human and financial resources to push the adoption of a new policy. The findings and the conclusions drawn in this paper are consistent with the conceptual framework employed. The PAA has proved to be a suitable analytical tool to understand and explain policy processes in various polities, from pluralist democracies to (semi-)authoritarianism.

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1. Introduction

Throughout modern Ethiopian history, forest policies have commonly been formulated and implemented by governmental actors and professional experts employed by the state administration. This is, for example, reflected in the 1965 and the 1980 forest laws, issued during the imperial and the socialist regimes, respectively (Melaku, 2003; Alemayehu, Arts, & Wiersum, 2013). For instance, the 1980 forest law vested enormous power in state actors to formulate and oversee the implementation of forest policy, but it did not recognize the role of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) (PMAC, 1980). However, the role of NGOs in forest policy-making has greatly increased since the early 1990s. Although the initial involvement of NGOs in Ethiopia was mainly confined to implementing drought relief and environmental rehabilitation activities,

they gradually became more active in initiating and catalyzing other policy processes. This reflects the growing importance of NGOs in forest and environmental governance worldwide (Humphreys, 2004; Arts, 2005; Rayner et al., 2010; Barnes, Van Laerhoven, & Driessen, 2016; Bernauer, Gampfer, Meng, & Su, 2016).

However, most of this NGO research focuses on pluralist political systems in Western Europe, the United States, and Canada. This paper therefore aims to advance our understanding of how NGOs try to influence policy-making in a ‘semi-authoritarian’ state such as Ethiopia. We particularly focus on environmental NGOs (hereafter referred to as ENGOS) that engage in environmental governance and are registered according to Ethiopia’s Charities and Societies Proclamation No. 621/2009 (FDRE, 2009) and examine the institutionalization of the newest forest policy reform¹ in Ethiopia, i.e., the adoption of the Participatory Forest Management

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¹ Here, ‘policy reform’ refers to a structural change in policy content, framework, and/or process deliberately induced in order to redress perceived errors in the existing system (see Grindle and Thomas, 1991).

(PFM) approach. The paper seeks to answer the following research questions: What strategies did ENGOs employ to influence the newest forest policy reform in Ethiopia? And to what extent did ENGOs themselves influence the formal adoption of the PFM policy?

Analyzing ENGOs' strategies to influence Ethiopian public policy is particularly relevant not only because the country has unique social, political, and historical features, but also because of the complex and paradoxical forest governance practices that began to emerge in the mid-1990s. For instance, the adoption of the PFM approach, first promoted by ENGO since the early 1990s, appears paradoxical to the prevailing view that portrays Ethiopia as a 'semi-authoritarian' state, with a closed policy-making tradition (Ottaway, 1990, 2003; Mulugeta, 2005). Indeed, in the eyes of Ethiopian state actors, ENGOs' involvement in political decision-making is of limited legitimacy if at all. Consequently, it is unclear how and to what extent these actors have influenced forest policy. Therefore, understanding the strategies and the impact of ENGOs in the latest forest policy reforms in Ethiopia complements the growing body of knowledge on the role and influence of non-governmental actors in environmental governance (Weinthal, 2004; Arts, 2005; Cerritelli, Bantirgu, & Abagodu, 2008; Humphreys, 2008; Rayner et al., 2010; Newell, Pattberg, & Schroeder, 2012; Bernstein & Cashore, 2012; Menard, 2013; Bernauer et al., 2016; Slavíková, Syrbe, Slavík, & Berens, 2017).

2. Conceptual framework

We assessed the institutionalization of the latest forest policy reforms in Ethiopia from the perspective of the Policy Arrangement Approach (PAA) (Van Tatenhove et al., 2000; Arts & Leroy, 2006; Arts & Buizer, 2009). The PAA was selected over other analytical tools for its comprehensiveness. First, the PAA builds on other policy theories in the field of discourse, network, and institutional analysis; therefore, it addresses ideas, actors, power, and rules in a relational perspective. In line with this perspective, Liefferink (2006) argues that unlike most other meso-level policy theories that tend to focus on only one or two policy dimensions, the PAA provides an excellent basis for an encompassing and dynamic analysis of policy processes. Second, the PAA takes a position midway along the agency–structure continuum (Arts & Leroy, 2006); thus, it analytically connects actors' day-to-day practices with broader structural changes (Van der Zouwen, 2006). The PAA framework thus enables us to analyze how new concepts such as the PFM approach have emerged or have been (re)framed, which actors or actors' coalitions were involved, and which resources and power were mobilized to translate this concept into a concrete policy. Such a dynamic policy process in which a new concept or discourse emerges and translates into a concrete policy arrangement is called 'institutionalization' (Van Tatenhove et al., 2000; Van der Zouwen, 2006).

The PAA framework constitutes four analytical dimensions: 1) ideas and discourses, 2) actors and coalitions, 3) power and resources, and 4) rules of the game (Arts & Leroy, 2006). These four dimensions are inherently connected, according to the PAA: change in one would imply changes in others. This interconnectedness can be expressed in the symbol of the tetrahedron (see Fig. 1). For example, if new stakeholders enter a policy arena, new coalitions, ideas and/or norms will emerge as well, although the extent to which such happens depends on the resourcefulness and power of the stakeholder concerned. Below, we will organize the analysis of ENGO influence on PFM policy in Ethiopia in accordance with these four elements (see Table 1).

Although there are many interpretations of 'a discourse' in the literature (Hajer, 1995; Arts & Buizer, 2009), in this context, it refers to a set of ideas, concepts, or desirable policy options advanced by a specific group of actors or an actors' coalition. It

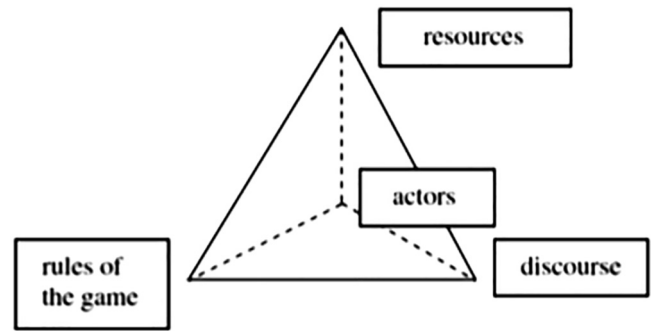


Fig. 1. Tetrahedron, symbolizing the connections among the dimensions of a policy arrangement (Source: Arts & Leroy, 2006).

also includes ideas about how to put those concepts or desirable options into effect (Arnouts, 2010). In this study, discourse focuses on the concepts and ideas regarding the relevance of the PFM approach as a preferred forest policy option, and the rationales that guided the formulation of these ideas and concepts into concrete laws and regulations. Actors can be organizations or individuals involved in a specific policy issue; for example the PFM approach. An actors' coalition is comparable to a discourse coalition, as distinguished by Hajer (1995), and can be defined as a group of players who share a policy discourse as well as policy-relevant resources. Resources relate to assets that policy actors have or can mobilize to achieve certain policy goals and sometimes also to prevent others from achieving their goals (Wiering & Arts, 2006). These resources include, for example, money, knowledge, and information, expertise to articulate problems and solutions, and resource ownership (e.g., forest or land). Power concerns the ability of actors or an actors' coalition to mobilize resources and achieve desired policy outcomes (Arts & Buizer, 2009). Rules of the game, finally, refer to law, regulations, and procedures that define responsibilities, access, and interactions among actors in policy processes (Van der Zouwen, 2006). These can be legal texts, policy and strategy documents, and regulatory instruments, but also directives that outline detailed implementation plans and competences of the various actors involved.

The PAA is a multi-actor approach in principle; it never only addresses state bureaucracies in public policy processes, but non-state actors as well, including NGOs (Arts & Leroy, 2006). However, the PAA is not a specific framework for analyzing the role and influence of NGOs. Therefore we add Slavíková et al.'s (2017) classification of NGOs to the PAA in order to study the strategies and activities of ENGOs in Ethiopian forest policy. This classification consists of five major roles: 1) ENGOs as 'watchdogs' that monitor existing environmental norms, engage in mandatory participation processes, and pursue legal action against environmentally harmful projects or campaigns; 2) ENGOs as 'value perceivers' that promote environmental values beyond existing regulations and raise citizen awareness; 3) ENGOs as 'field actors and action coordinators' that provide environmental public goods and ensure landscape maintenance; 4) ENGOs as 'knowledge transmitters' that educate stakeholders and consult land users' agendas and problems; and 5) ENGOs as 'partners in collaborative governance' that influence the formulation and implementation of public policy. Our expectation is that Ethiopian ENGOs have been able to play some roles more successfully than others, given the political context they had to work in. For example, being a critical watchdog is a difficult role to play in a semi-authoritarian state, but transmitting values and knowledge from NGOs to communities and bureaucracies and executing field projects is probably feasible in such a context.

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