Just deliberation: Can communicative rationality support socially just environmental conservation in rural Africa?

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A B S T R A C T

This article evaluates the use of deliberative methods for filling the democratic deficit arising from the shift to management through partnerships in conservation in developing countries. We ask whether deliberative approaches are feasible in a rural African context and the extent to which they can form a basis for socially just environmental decision making. In answering these questions we focus on two main concerns: the possibility of achieving satisfactory representation and the possibility of constructing counter-factual spaces of deliberation in which identity-based bias is suspended in favour of reasoned argument. Our survey data suggests that participants are themselves satisfied that representation is fair, and that the consensus attained at the end of deliberative events is not the result of domination of more powerful interests. Nevertheless, our more qualitative observations of individuals involved in deliberative events provide stronger cause for caution. It is not possible to leave power and prejudice out of deliberative processes, though well managed spaces of deliberation can temporarily mitigate these and in doing so provide some empowerment to normally marginalised participants.

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1. Introduction

During the past few decades the geographical expansion of terrestrial and marine conservation areas has gone hand in hand with changes to the ways in which they are managed. Of particular interest to this article is a shift in the range of actors legitimised as management partners: initially with a shift 'beyond the state' to community conservation, and more recently a shift 'beyond the community', engaging private sector and NGO stakeholders in conservation partnerships. Partnership approaches to biodiversity conservation have flourished to the extent that they might now be considered part and parcel of 'good governance' orthodoxies, in the way that participatory approaches had previously become so. However, partnership approaches can lead to a democratic deficit, wherein apparently pluralistic forms of resource governance actually provide a veil for the concentration of elite power (Cooke and Kothari, 2001; Kesby, 2005, 2007; Chilvers, 2009). Such new governance configurations pose dangers of regulatory capture (Forsyth, 2005) because they can bypass formal democratic processes and empower actors who are not accountable through

electoral process and who are psychologically or physically distant from local communities.

Deliberative approaches might be able to help overcome this particular hazard of conservation through partnerships because they aim to secure democratic debate in which reason and evidence, rather than power and vested interests, underpin environmental decision-making (Taylor, 2010). This article focuses on this proposed function for deliberative methods, investigating the possibilities and constraints for deliberative approaches through evaluation of four deliberative workshops that considered priorities for national park management in Rwanda. These workshops were intended to provide opportunity for deliberative democracy, by creating 'rational' spaces of communication in which identity-based bias is suspended and where reason and recognition triumph over power and bias. The contrast we employ here draws on a consciously Western, Habermasian framing of deliberation, in which bias refers to judgements formed from subjective, identity-based vested interests and inclinations that foreclose on potentially valid alternatives. In contrast, rational argument suppresses such bias through communicative norms that privilege relatively 'objective' evidence in an honest attempt at comparison with alternatives. In principle such deliberation might help to deliver socially just environmental management, through fair procedures that one would expect to feed into more equitable distributional outcomes. This is because, where vested interests are allowed to

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prosper over rational arguments (such as those based on need, desert or merit), it will be the interests of the powerful that prosper most. However, we recognise that there are considerable barriers to achieving more deliberative, democratic outcomes and the aim of this research is therefore to question the feasibility of constructing such ideal spaces of communication in rural Africa. Our empirical cases of participatory and deliberative events are the product of a research project into conservation partnerships and involved deliberations among representatives from a range of different organisations, across public and private sectors, and from grass-roots to international in their scale of operation.

2. The case for communicative approaches

Participation has been a key response to the governance requirements entailed by the expansion of biodiversity conservation. But it is now well documented that participation itself is not emancipatory where it is superficial, is manipulated by powerful interests, and serves to insulate dominant agendas against fundamental critique (Outhwaite, 2009; Cooke and Kothari, 2001; Chilvers, 2009). And yet participatory and deliberative approaches are widely valued as enhancing democracy, freedom and wellbeing (Dryzek, 2000; Sen, 1999, 2009; Crocker, 2008) whilst also improving the quality of science-based environmental decision-making (Stirling, 2006; Horlick-Jones and Sime, 2004; Funtowicz and Ravetz, 1993). For Habermas (1984), the capacity for participatory debate to present a radical democratic project stemmed from the nature of communication itself. Deliberative democracy requires so-called 'counterfactual' space in which real world social hierarchies are suspended, leaving 'good argument' as the lone authority (O'Neill, 2001; Davies, 2007). For many advocates of deliberative democracy, such counterfactual spaces can become factual due to the pre-conscious rules inherent in conversation: a pre-configured orientation towards rational resolution that makes it possible for participants to displace bias in favour of rational argument (Davies, 2007). In the hypothetical counterfactual condition, only the force of an argument matters, judged by its communal utility (Sanders, 1997). For advocates of deliberative democracy, the public testing of arguments in such a situation can in principle lead to non-coerced mutual agreement regarding environmental problems. Whilst some therefore consider it possible to construct such spaces as 'factuals', our view is that this can only ever be relative – the absolute absence of power will always remain counterfactual. Even the most carefully managed of participatory spaces can't in practice be shielded from the intrusion of social status and relations. Furthermore, the act of management is itself an intervention borne from the discourse of 'deliberation'.

The flourishing interest in deliberative democracy has been driven by the need to engage with value pluralism (Smith, 2003), the emergence of ever more complex and contended environmental problems (Innes and Booher, 2003), and new governance arrangements for addressing these. A key claim underpinning deliberative democracy is that its methods can embrace value pluralism whilst also helping to resolve the democratic deficit that can result from partnership approaches for environmental management. Deliberative methods are then a form of democratic engagement in which groups representing different sectors, interests and knowledge sets participate in debate and negotiation in order to learn and probe each others' understanding of a problem. It is an attempt to construct a 'positive negotiating space' for building capacity in partnerships (Forsyth, 2005). The principle conditions for deliberative democracy are 'inclusiveness' and 'unconstrained dialogue' (Smith, 2003).

Deliberative approaches can in theory satisfy a normative requirement for just and democratic process, a substantive requirement for better decision making and an instrumental requirement for legitimacy (Stirling, 2006). Deliberative approaches to exploring policy options are capable of combining different forms of knowledge (expert and local; analytical and experiential; social and natural) and can lead to better informed decisions (Horlick-Jones and Sime, 2004; Stirling, 2006). Deliberative processes are transformative, in the sense that different values are not simply aggregated or traded off between participants but are expected to negotiate with each other with the potential for mutual change (Innes and Booher, 2003). Through both additive and transformative effects on available understanding, deliberation contributes to better decision making in a world in which 'bounded rationality' limits any individual or stakeholder group's ability to grasp a problem's complexity (Dryzek, 2000).

Deliberative processes are also increasingly viewed as a viable direction for practical thinking about social justice. For example, dissatisfied with the impractical search for universal principles of justice such as those that Rawls (1971) derives from his original position, Sen (2009) moves towards conceiving justice as a process of impartial deliberation. This is a potentially fertile line of enquiry as it is not hard to see how deliberative principles of communication can be linked to the three dimensions of environmental justice proposed by Schlosberg (2004, 2007). First, it would appear to support just *procedure* through parity of participation; second, just procedure is generally considered a condition that serves just *distribution* (Crocker, 2008); and, third, because parity of participation is a critical determinant of *recognition* (Fraser, 2001). It is in these three senses that we imagine the potential for deliberation to be empowering, and to be foundational for social justice. In this paper, we restrict our focus to the putative link between deliberative process and procedural justice. We consider this in terms of the possibility for deliberative processes to facilitate equitable communication.

3. Challenges for deliberative democracy

We have so far focused on potential benefits of deliberative processes, considering the substantive case for better decision making and the normative case for socially just decision making. Much advocacy for deliberative democracy has roots in the critical theory of Jürgen Habermas and those liberal political theorists who have embraced his normative arguments for public reason. Perhaps the most important critique of this body of work comes from post-structuralist social theorists who question the objective status of reason implied by Habermasian thinking. We briefly explore some key facets of these alternative perspectives on deliberative democracy, and in doing so outline more precisely the goals of the empirical research.

There are both practical, place-bound and more universal arguments about the obstacles to achieving communicative 'reason'. With regards our case location in Rwanda, place-bound contexts of concern stem from economic, social and political conditions. These include resource poverty, high power differentials between officials and marginalised groups, comparatively weakly developed democratic institutions and civil society, and limited communications infrastructure. One of our objectives here is therefore to ask whether deliberative approaches are suitable in the context of rural Rwanda, and in other places that share such conditions. We should be clear that we posit these as obstacles to a 'Western', Habermasian tradition of communicative rationality as opposed to any more indigenous traditions of deliberation. We are not therefore exploring the capacity of Rwandans for good communication but only the appropriateness of one set of technologies. Indeed, there is reason to believe that communicative norms in Rwanda have been, and to an extent still are, quite