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Power, Legitimacy, and Participation in the Co-Creation of Water Policy

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Abstract

Integrated water resources management is considered a complex sustainability problem since it requires the active and effective participation of diverse communities of knowledge for the collaborative identification and implementation of transformative solutions. Therefore, the construction of a water related policy demands a highly participative and integrative approach, with the involvement of different actors. Recently, transdisciplinarity and collaborative governance have been promoted as ideal approaches to empower participants through their meaningful engagement in the process of co-creation of policy. However, empowerment does not necessarily occur in hierarchical structures where power relations may obstruct a more inclusive and equitable experience. Therefore, it is crucial to recognize power imbalances in early phases of the process to try to level up the floor for all participants. Otherwise, it is possible that some stakeholders may end up being excluded, overruled and, in worst cases, abused by dominating actors. Consequently, it is important to study power relations in the co-creation of natural resources policy. We take on a case study of the construction process of a water policy in Tiraque (Bolivia). Data was collected between 2017 and 2020 and analysed using stakeholder and power analysis tools. Findings show that although the construction of this policy was a common need prioritised by multiple local actors, the agenda was set by a local NGO. Instead of a process of co-creation, it was mainly a socialization process of a policy draft, developed by the NGO, at meetings with only strategically chosen people with decision-making power. Attendees had to transmit the information to their grassroots. However, due to language and other barriers, it was not possible for them and for their communities to critically analyse it. To conclude the process, the policy was presented for its approval. This failed, as irrigation organizations managed to challenge and block the process, which led to a new agenda, starting all over again. This case shows that effective participation depends largely on access to timely and adequate technical and legal information. Moreover, it reflects the importance of collaborative frameworks that can transcend grounded local, top-down, decision-making power structures.

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