

The Advocacy Coalition Framework: A Theoretical Frame for SANREM to Address Policy Change and Learning

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The everyday activities of individuals and communities are generally channeled and limited by decisions about resource allocation and regulation that are taken beyond the local level. These decisions may or may not be contested and the “beneficiaries” of those decisions may or may not be aware of them. Further, these decisions are made not only by governments, but also by corporations and non-governmental organizations. Information is always used to justify those decisions, but it is often sought after the decision to validate the course taken rather than before the decision to inform it.

In our research in the Andes, we work with community-level decision makers to identify the key issues around which decisions concerning natural resource allocation and regulation are made. Then we identify key institutional market, state, and civil society actors engaged in those issues. We can identify key decision points and critical information used at decision making junctures by analyzing each institution’s desired future conditions, mental causal models of how to achieve those conditions, and then clustering institutions around different aspects of these conditions and causal models.

SANREM, which funds this research, is a program that has as its goal the betterment of natural resource management. One aspect of improved natural resource management has to do with the decisions made by institutions and actors at a ground level that are encompassed and enclosed in a policy framework determined by multiple levels. By working with local communities, sharing our data in the case of

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Cotacachi, Ecuador, and working with community members to gather the data in the case of Colpar, Peru, we are designing appropriate decision-support tools that link levels and sectors in ways that improve local sustainability and address issues such as the economy, the environment, and equity.

We have adapted the Advocacy Coalition Framework (Sabatier and Jenkins-Smith, 1993) for our studies of advocacy coalitions in the Andes. An advocacy coalition consists of actors from a variety of market, state, and civil society institutions at all levels who share a set of basic beliefs (policy goals plus causal models and other perceptions) and who seek to manipulate the rules, budgets, and personnel of institutions in order to achieve these goals over time. The Advocacy Coalition Framework allows us to examine coalition formation and reformation over time. We can also investigate how information is used by different coalitions at different points in time. The Framework allows us to go beyond the assumption that policy formation follows a linear process of problem identification, agenda setting, adoption, implementation and policy evaluation (input, throughput, output and feedback) to work with the cyclical and interactive nature of decision making regarding agriculture and natural resource management.

Our review of research on the utilization of public policy analysis and other forms of relatively technical information by public policymakers draws these major conclusions:

- 1) Substantial cultural differences impede interaction between researchers and decision makers at all levels.
- 2) While policy analyses seldom influence specific governmental decisions, they often serve an “enlightenment function” by gradually altering the concepts and assumptions of policymakers over time.
- 3) Policy analyses are often used for non-substantive reasons, such as to enhance organizational credibility, defend or expand turf, and delay undesirable decisions.
- 4) If researchers and policy analysts wish to have a significant impact on policy, they generally must abandon the role of neutral technician and instead adopt that of an advocate.

Thus decision-support tools must enhance the ability of institutional actors to understand their own and other institutional actor's desired ends and assumed means. The research we are undertaking is designed to enable grassroots organizations to develop their own sources of knowledge and their ability to make coalitions with others who share their desired future conditions and mental causal models.

We therefore examine the following processes:

- 1) The interaction of competing advocacy coalitions within a policy subsystem;
- 2) Changes external to the subsystem in socioeconomic conditions, system-wide governing coalitions, and output from other subsystems that provide opportunities and obstacles to competing coalitions within the subsystem; and,
- 3) The effect of stable system parameters, such as social structure and constitutional rules, on constraints and resources of various subsystem actors. In situations of great instability, it is often difficult to determine what the stable system parameters are. This is particularly challenging in a site such as Ecuador, where constitutional changes, political instability, and major economic changes of crisis proportions make it important to understand the emergence of advocacy coalitions that improve the well-being of people and places in the rural Andes. We contrast the Ecuadorian situation to Peru, where there has been greater government stability, but increasing delegitimization of the national government.

Research in developed countries has found that coalitions organize around shared desired future conditions and shared mental causal models of how to get there. These common beliefs lend credibility to particular sorts of information over others. Understanding these differing informational sources — complex mathematical models, analogies, metaphors, anecdotes, bivariate changes, etc. — can help researchers better inform the coalitions as they seek to influence natural resource management, including agriculture.

Desired future conditions and mental causal models emerge in both institutions and in individuals. As individuals and institutions

change and as the containing systems change, desired future conditions can be slightly modified or elaborated and mental causal models can be tweaked slightly. More often than not, however, changes in an institution's desired future conditions and mental causal models are accompanied by a change in personnel within that institution.

We ascertain desired future conditions and mental causal models by analyzing information provided by institutional actors in documents and interviews. We then empirically examine the extent to which these change over time. Only by understanding the implicit causal model of each institution can decision-support tools be effectively provided to help move toward a stated desired future condition.

Desired future conditions for a particular location are compared in terms of the four types of capital we have identified in our previous work in the area: human capital, social capital, natural capital, and financial or built capital. Human capital encompasses people's knowledge and skills. Social capital refers to networks of social organizations. Natural capital includes a region's natural resources, for example, water, land, forests, and biodiversity. Financial capital — this is fairly straightforward — has to do with economics and infrastructure. All four types of capital are critical contributors to long-term sustainability. When one of these capitals is not included among desired future conditions, it can provide an opening for discussion by other institutional actors seeking to reach sustainable goals of a healthy ecosystem, a vital economy, and social equity and inclusion. When there are agreements on specific aspects of these different place-based resources, the possibilities for collaboration are enhanced.

The Advocacy Coalition Framework hypothesizes that changes come within advocacy coalitions because external changes that allow for redistribution of power favors one belief system over another. By analyzing different socio-political contexts within somewhat similar areas in the Andes, we can determine how local action that enhances issues of sustainability (ecosystem health, social inclusion and equity, and economic vitality) are facilitated or constrained by decisions made at higher system levels. Local understanding of how current policies of privatization, decentralization, and participation are developed, interpreted and implemented in their situation is key to empowering communities to become part of advocacy coalitions that influence the de-

cisions that facilitate or limit their sustainable options. Our analysis is aimed at determining how desired future conditions (core values) and mental causal models (near core values) of different institutional actors compare, contrast, and interact so that advocacy coalitions can be formed to use decision-support tools that enhance sustainability at the local level. Our comparative methodologies — one working with our non-governmental organization (NGO) colleagues as the primary researchers and one working with the traditional community organization supported by an NGO as the primary researchers — allow us to determine how information about the current state of sustainability can best be framed in order for policies to be implemented at various levels to increase future sustainability. Decision-support tools will be based on multi-institutional, multilevel collaborations. In the context of increasing decentralization and privatization, it is imperative that civil society, market, and state institutions at the local level work together and form coalitions with others who can set the stage for household, enterprise, and community decisions regarding agricultural and natural resource management.

Reference

- Sabatier, Paul A. and Hank C. Jenkins-Smith, eds. 1993. *Policy Change and Learning: an Advocacy Coalition Approach*. Boulder, CO: Westview Press. 304 pp.