

Understanding policy processes in Ethiopia: a response

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We appreciate the opportunity to engage with Nyssen *et al.*'s (2004, this issue) response to our earlier JMAS paper (Keeley & Scoones 2000). While they make a number of important points – many of which we agree with – we feel, however, that they fundamentally misrepresent our paper, and miss the central argument. This may be due to lack of clarity on our part, so, to kick off our response, it is perhaps worth reiterating the key points of the original piece.

In the original paper we were criticising three things. First, a history of environmental rehabilitation policies based on an assumption that increasing land degradation is the trend in all places. Second, that the principal reason for this is farmer and pastoralist mismanagement of the land. And, third, given the perceived urgency, the most appropriate response had been, at least until recently, a pattern of often 'one-size fits all' implementation of conservation techniques and practices.

Our concern in the original paper was to show, through an analysis of the policy process, how such a set of policy conclusions are arrived at. We wanted to unearth how stories about policy are made by different people, and how, in turn, they often reflect institutionalised assumptions and positioned interests. With such an understanding of policy-making as process, we were interested in seeing how particular combinations of knowledge and power interacted to create particular policy solutions and implementation strategies. And how, in turn, these processes are highly contextualised – in particular historical periods, and in particular geographical regions, with differentiated histories of politics and bureaucracy. Such an understanding, we argue in the original paper – and at greater length in a recent book (Keeley & Scoones 2003) – is essential for seeing how science (and its representations in consultancy reports, the media and so on) creates policy, and, indeed, how particular dominant policy concerns create certain types of science.

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All this is not to suggest, as Nyssen *et al.* apparently assume we do, that there is no environmental degradation in Ethiopia, and that soil and water conservation measures are irrelevant. Far from it. As we indicate in the original paper (p. 91), our concern then was not to assess the technical details of the nature of soil degradation in Ethiopia. This is a complex topic, worthy of separate treatment (see Scoones 2001 for a book-length examination of this important issue, including Ethiopia). Much work on Ethiopia, including our own, has shown how soil degradation is a centrally important issue. But often – and this is the key point – perhaps not quite in the way that standard policy narratives suggest.

The gap between policy justification and ground reality is, though, not just of academic concern: it carries with it major implications for people and their livelihoods. We argue that many past interventions in Ethiopia have been supported by simplistic, often unjustified, claims, and that these have had potentially negative impacts on poor people's livelihoods through their blanket application. We therefore wanted to ask: how is it that an overly simplistic view of environmental change occupies centre-stage in policy debate, often pushing aside more nuanced, complex and sophisticated understandings? For us, this required an analysis of the interaction of knowledge and policy, and, with this, insights into politics and power. We agree with Nyssen *et al.* that what is critical is the way in which scientific studies are taken up by policymakers and donors, a process where many of the subtleties are lost. Hence, the difficulty lies in the way that findings from the Soil Conservation Research Programme, for instance, are interpreted and the key messages presented. As Nyssen *et al.* point out (cf. their note 3) exaggerated, inaccurate and misleading statistics are commonplace in both policy documents and sometimes scientific papers. Part of the concern of the original paper was to interrogate why this was the case, and what implications this had.

In the paper we traced, necessarily in schematic outline, two approaches that came to dominate Ethiopian policy discourse – in our shorthand, the Green Revolution and Environmental Rehabilitation approaches. Our critique of these, following many others, must be seen to be situated in the particular contexts within which they were implemented. As we point out – and this seems to have been completely missed by Nyssen *et al.* – such discourses on policy are not uniform or immutable. Indeed, one of the key points of the paper is that they can change, and indeed have done so (see pp. 105ff.). At the time of writing the original paper, we detected the emergence of a more participatory approach to both agricultural development and environmental rehabilitation. This, as

we suggested, combines various elements of earlier approaches, but makes interaction with farmers more central.

We therefore thoroughly agree with Nyssen *et al.* that environmental rehabilitation and participation should not be seen as alternatives (on this 'convergence', see p. 108). Indeed, there has been much interesting experimentation with more participatory approaches to soil and water conservation over recent years, including by some of the authors of the Nyssen *et al.* paper (cf. Mitiku Haile *et al.* 2001). But, as we are sure Nyssen and colleagues will concede, such approaches were, at least initially, seen as marginal, and not part of the mainstream. That they have found their way into more formal extension delivery systems and government policy is witness to the fact that policies can and do change.

Of interest to us, as students of the policy process, is how such changes happened. A variety of questions arise: What new alternative discourses were created? How were these promoted? Through what actor networks? What policy space opened up to allow such views to move more centre stage? An examination of such questions, we argue, can help us understand how policy actually works in practice. This is not a neat, linear story where rationalist science, once proven, finds its way neatly into policy and practice. We all know that this is not the case. But we actually have little idea what actually goes on in practice in differing settings particularly in Africa. Our paper was a small and preliminary (now extended in Keeley & Scoones 2003) attempt to raise these questions for the Ethiopian context.

A key finding showed, perhaps unsurprisingly, that contexts really matter. Our comparison of SPNNR and Tigray, for example, highlighted dramatically different policy processes, linked to differences in political and bureaucratic cultures (pp. 110–15). At the time the original paper was written, SPNNR was an example of a region where, for reasons of history and politics, local participation and appropriate policies were thin on the ground. In Tigray, however, very positive changes in approach were under way, involving a change from a historically aggressive rehabilitation policy to more locally sensitive practice, with policy and implementation changes based on carefully listening to local perceptions.

In sum, then, our view is that assumptions about land degradation need to be interrogated, with some of the statistics and studies, and their influence on policy debates, needing to be looked at with caution. Indeed an overwhelmingly negative view potentially hides innovatory practices where farmers and other land users are regenerating their resource base (see Eyasu & Scoones 1999; Reij & Waters-Bayer 2001; Scoones 2001). To emphasise again: we are not denying that increasing aggregate food production is unimportant, that increasing soil fertility is irrelevant, or that

fertilisers and improved seeds have no role to play. The issue is the way that crisis narratives suggest across-the-board imposition of solutions that may only be appropriate for certain settings.

Given this, we argue – together with Nyssen *et al.* – that the most appropriate forms of environmental policy will be inclusive and deliberative, with both the analysis and framing of problems, and the design and implementation of solutions, being done in collaboration between scientists and farmers. But this does not mean we reject all existing conservation techniques and policy, as Nyssen *et al.* seem to think. Instead, we aim to encourage a more differentiated understanding of problems and a more focused application of solutions – some of which, no doubt, will include the widely accepted and used approaches. But, just as with past approaches, a one-size-fits-all participatory approach will not do either.

Our argument that debates about participation have emerged as a result of engagement with international concerns is not an argument for international intervention by NGOs. This seems a rather bizarre reading of our paper. Our discussion (pp. 109–10) was simply pointing to one of a number of reasons why a participation agenda had begun to be incorporated in the Ethiopian context. But such approaches need to be tested, adapted and changed to respond to local circumstances. As we point out, participation in Tigray may look very different from participation in SNNPR, because of a range of political and bureaucratic considerations.

Several years on, and following much feedback on this paper and other related work, we still wish to emphasise our basic point that understanding policy processes, including the way that science interacts with policy, is a key challenge. This does not mean to say that all scientific analyses of the problem are wrong, nor that all technologies suggested as solutions are inappropriate, as Nyssen *et al.* seem to infer. But, we would argue, a more circumspect, critical and analytical stance may help us in the longer term towards what everyone can agree is the ultimate objective: more sustainable, secure and productive futures for those living in rural Ethiopia. We hope that the original paper, together with this interchange, will encourage others, perhaps with other interpretations and perspectives, to examine the nature of policy processes in Ethiopia and elsewhere in Africa, and see such enquiry, in interaction with technical scientists, as part of a joint endeavour, central to efforts in development and policy reform.

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