

CPR FORUM RESPONSE

Say What You Mean

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In our article “A Theory of Access,” Nancy Peluso and I define and elaborate a term that is frequently used but rarely defined. We did not do this in order to seek a consensus on meaning. We did it to produce an analytic framework for empirically exploring instances of benefit appropriation and explaining those appropriations within a larger social and political-economic context. Further, we did it so that studies of benefit appropriation can be conducted in a comparative manner—so that those interested in empirical analysis of this particular question can talk to each other and can build a larger body of comparative knowledge. Conceptual clarity is about internal consistency and not necessarily about consensus. It enables us to know how our ideas are similar, how they differ, and why.

Clear definitions enable us to connect theory to observation and observations back to theory—also making them practical tools for connecting action to outcomes. A definition of “access,” “decentralization” or “participation” should be based on our observations and assumptions about causality. Decentralization, for example, is promoted because it is believed to increase equity and efficiency and improve management. Therefore, its definition should be specific enough to allow us to know decentralization when we see it. The definition should be linked to the conditions we believe will result in the outcomes for which decentralization is promoted. This is a definition that at once carries an empirical agenda that can allow us to test the theories behind reforms and actions, and can serve as a political agenda for those who are promoting or resisting decentralization—helping to identify the elements that need to be promoted or resisted.

The definitions that people adopt, like theories, are a function of interest. They are historically and socially contingent and they are easily harnessed, co-opted and reformulated in public discourse and political action. They reflect social positions and political agendas. The definitions people use are a great source of information on their implicit interests, their imbrication in governance and accountability systems, and their (often flimsy) theories of causality. Participation is a classic term that, in the development context, is often used to label processes for mobilizing people to implement the agendas of others. It is used for instrumental objectives of implementation rather than procedural objectives of empowerment and enfranchisement.

For example, there are now armies of participation facilitators, trained by donors, NGOs and the UN, that are foisting environmental agendas on local populations. These agendas are also themselves ideologically linked to keywords such as “biodiversity loss,” “deforestation,” “rational management,” “management plan,” and “ignorance,” whose vague definitions become levers for coercing local Oaxacan archeological sites play a significant role in people to participate in natural resource management agendas that they know to be irrelevant to their own interests and that are often not justified any scientific or ecological grounds.

In the Sahel, fortunes are built on the private oligopolies enabled by quotas and licenses justified on a discourse about protecting a “fragile” environment from “anarchic” woodcutters. Why doesn’t anyone ask what the forest service and environmental NGOs mean by ‘fragile’ in a harsh zone like the Sahel where anything ‘fragile’ dried up and died long ago? Why doesn’t anyone ask what they mean by “anarchic” when illegal production patterns are no more ecologically damaging than those “permitted” by the forest service—neither of which are “organized”? Also, it is interesting to ask why so many people—foresters, environmentalists, development agents—repeat these keywords like mindless incantations? This is a serious research question about consensus formation in the absence of evidence and often in the absence of theory or clear definitions.

Words are mighty two edged swords. They can be used to clarify and obscure. As Dr. Poteete states “Policy frameworks often use language vague enough to support multiple interpretations.” Behind which there are multiple

interests. The language is often used to please or hoodwink donors and trick constituents. It is our job as researchers to clarify this obscurity—for both scientific and political ends. I agree with and deepen Dr. Poteete’s message. But, I believe that a large dose of cynicism is desirable. Language is always changing and for good reasons. We do not need consistent terminology. Indeed there are often irreducible epistemological differences among theories—and therefore definitions—that do even admit the idea of consensus.

Scholars must interrogate and specify own definitions and they must interrogate the ways others take and transform terms. Why do different actors use different definitions? How do these differences evolve? What are the material, political and cultural meanings and interests behind these choices? What kinds of collusions, divisions, violence and coercion do such terms reflect? Consensus is not the aim. Clarity is one aim. The best we can do is to state our premises and definitions so that others can know—or think they know—what we mean.

For Further Information:

- Ribot, Jesse C. and Nancy Lee Peluso. 2003. “A Theory of Access” *Rural Sociology*, Volume 68, Issue 2.
- Ribot, J.C. 2001. “Science, Use Rights and Exclusion: A History of Forestry in Francophone West Africa,” Issue Paper No. 104, Drylands Programme, International Institute for Environment and Development.

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