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Environment, Society, and Economy: Policies Working Together

by David B. Brooks and Jamie Schnurr



Viet Nam is one of many countries attempting to harmonize environmental, social, and economic policies

Among Southeast Asian nations, Viet Nam is poised to join the next wave of Asian "tigers." But the heady pace of economic growth has carried with it significant social and environmental stresses -- and this in a country where four of every five persons works in agriculture, fisheries, or forestry. Rapid industrialization of these sectors, coupled with hurried urbanization as people are forced from traditional employment in rural areas, has contributed to the degradation of the natural resources that in many ways are the foundation of Viet Nam's society and economy. Therefore, Viet Nam is now attempting to harmonize its environmental, social, and economic objectives through a national environmental action plan.

The Vietnamese experience is by no means unique. In no country of the world are there neat divisions among goals for ecological sustainability, social equity, and economic efficiency. Policies and programs targeted at each objective have impacts in more than one sector -- typically, many sectors -- at once. Nonetheless, researchers and policy makers are more likely to focus on particular problems. Although the

need for policy integration is assumed, it is often left to others to address explicitly.

BARRIERS

Not surprisingly, the task of integrating policy invariably faces significant barriers. Interactions among ecological, social, and economic systems create complex cause and effect relationships that are not easily unravelled. Government agencies, corporate departments, and research and academic institutes are typically set up according to discrete sectors and disciplines, each with its own interests (and interest groups), virtually assuring policy segregation. Our political economy emphasizes discounting the future value of human development, natural resources, and ecological processes in exchange for shorter-term economic development. We find ourselves short of **experience in the effective application** of analytical tools and decision-making processes to identify, evaluate, and manage the necessary trade-offs among objectives.

WHAT SORT OF INTEGRATED POLICY?

One way of confronting the problem of complexity is to define the different levels at which integration should take place, whether this is local, regional, national, or international. Another strategy is to approach policy from an ecosystem perspective, such as fluvial or watershed regions, or bio-regions based on vegetation.

There are varying degrees of integration. A sectoral policy that is sensitive to other sectoral policies or issues could be considered one degree of integration. Command and control forms of legislation that require social and/or environmental impact assessments of development projects, or "end-of-the-pipe" abatement technology applied to industrial production systems, are more advanced forms of integration. Even deeper degrees of integration involve market-based instruments, green or socially responsible procurement measures, and various types of voluntary arrangements to attempt to make environmentally and socially responsible management a priority throughout government, industry, and among citizens. Strategic environmental planning, life cycle assessment and integrated impact assessment techniques are other tools that can foster forms of deeper integration.

One case study suggests that various degrees of integration can occur incrementally along a continuum. In this case, a series of legislated impact assessments created awareness of the environmental impacts of building hydro lines on a preselected site. The "learning" that took place during the assessments and the desire to apply the new knowledge, eventually led to change within the utility, which instituted strategic environmental planning processes and self-directed assessments. In the end, new management practices were introduced that proactively assessed the impacts of alternate sites for its transmission lines.

COORDINATION AND PARTICIPATION

Integration of any sort requires coordination and collaboration in designing, planning, and implementing policy to establish clear objectives and divisions of responsibility. More advanced degrees of integration require more sophisticated forms of communication, decision-making, and organizational behaviour.

Mechanisms and tools such as multi-stakeholder fora and "user-friendly" information systems can provide a range of people with the means for having input into policy processes. As well as contributing to informed decision-making, the process also helps policy makers understand the socio-economic and ecological context in which they work, and all stakeholders to appreciate the trade-offs entailed in a given policy decision.

GOVERNANCE SYSTEMS

Whether multi-stakeholder processes and other forms of participation can be applied in developing

countries depends on specific political, social, and cultural conditions. Systems of "governance" that can anticipate societal responses to various integrative measures and accommodate the policy objectives of a range of stakeholders and sectors are crucial.

In this perspective, governance means the inter and intra-organizational arrangements, decision-making processes, incentives, and disincentives through which government and non-government actors -- including civil society, the public, communities, and the private sector -- influence decisions about societal priorities and resource allocations. It goes beyond the formal institutions of government and recognizes the significant role of non-governmental actors in policy formulation and implementation, particularly in developing countries.

INTEGRATION MODELS

One model for policy integration uses a triangle whose points represent environmental, social, and economic objectives. This approach is useful, but it subsumes political activity under the "social" category. Political activity is the main way that any society does the integration. A tetrahedral -- or three-sided pyramid -- model, where the upper point is politics, would include not only government as elected officials but also all the institutions set up by government to carry out its policies.

Despite coordination and participation strategies, efforts to balance conflicting objectives often cannot avoid some degree of conflict. Success in managing conflict lies in structuring the process so that it involves the affected parties' representatives in the design and evolution of the process itself, as well as in the negotiation of substantive issues.

Interest-based negotiation is one example of a structured, deliberate attempt to cooperatively seek an outcome that attempts to accommodate rather than compromise the interests of all concerned.

LEARNING

In structured multi-stakeholder and negotiation processes, learning is fostered through decision-making guidelines, communication rules and process steps. Learning can also be fostered even when specific structures are absent. In the case of the hydro utility discussed above, legislation, along with encouragement from management and an inter-departmental committee, prompted line departments to learn from their experiences and develop more effective integrative tools.

Learning can best be encouraged when the various parties jointly define rules for communication and negotiation, have equal access to information, create incentives for risk taking, and allow a margin for error. Other positive elements involve the delegation of responsibility and a willingness and ability to capture and build on unexpected results.

IDRC'S APPROACH TO POLICY INTEGRATION

IDRC has taken a dual approach to policy integration as a research question. One component is exploration and the other is "learning by doing." Among other things, the Centre has reviewed all projects it funds under the theme of integrating environmental, social, and economic policy (INTESEP) to identify common threads. It has supported case studies where specific information was lacking and funded workshops in different regions to learn how researchers and policy makers address policy integration.

ROLE OF RESEARCH

There is no longer any question that research can play a valuable role in a successful integration process. For example, research can identify policy options or alternative institutional mechanisms under different scenarios, and analyze their advantages and disadvantages. Research can also develop the tools and

techniques for analysis and evaluation.

Not surprisingly, the policy emphasis in integration varies by region or country. The focus in Africa tends to be on impacts of macro-level economic policies on social development, whereas in Asia the environmental implications of economic growth are paramount.

The findings also highlight challenging questions for policy integration. In what context is integration appropriate? From a governance perspective, how should integration be managed and by whom?

LESSONS LEARNED

One key conclusion drawn from the research to date is that integration hinges on the process by which the trade-offs inherent in any policy choice are evaluated and managed. Political institutions and policy-making processes need to have the flexibility to promote and foster integration when appropriate.

Ultimately, policy integration unleashes processes whose outcomes cannot be predicted at the outset. A variety of stakeholders may be relevant in any given context, which will affect both substance and process. As a result, inputs can arrive from diverse sources, leading to several possible outcomes, any of which may meet goals of equity and sustainability.

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[Integration: a skeptic's view](#) *David Brooks discusses the problems with using integration as an analytical tool for policy development.*

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APRIL-DECEMBER 1996

- April 5 [*Bednets for malaria control*](#) by Robert Bourgoing
- April 12 [*Environment, society and economy : policies working together*](#) by David B. Brooks and Jamie Schnurr
- April 12 [*Global action on local agenda 21*](#) by Kirsteen MacLeod
- April 19 [*Sustainable urban planning in Santos, Brazil*](#) by Patrick Knight
- April 26 [*Integrated pest management for Colombian small farmers*](#) by David Mowbray
- May 3 [*Infectious diseases : a growing global threat*](#) by John Eberlee
- May 10 [*Naturalized knowledge systems of indigenous communities*](#) by Salli M.K. Benedict
- May 17 [*Public stake in Senegal's environmental planning*](#) by Khodia Ndiaye
- May 17 [*Environment, society and economy : policies working together*](#) by David B. Brooks and Jamie Schnurr
- May 24 [*Cambodia : bringing sewage treatment onstream*](#) by Emilia Casella
- May 31 [*Community participation in planning for Jinja, Uganda*](#) by Anna Borzello
- June 7 [*Children's health in Ghana's North*](#) by Jason Lothian
- June 14 [*Water policy in Manila*](#) by Estrella Maniquis
- June 21 [*Reconciling ecological, economic, and social imperatives*](#) by Pattie LaCroix
- June 28 [*Reconstructing war-torn societies*](#) by Jennifer Pepall
- July 5 [*Project Leader Tracer Study reviews IDRC's performance*](#) by Curt Labond
- July 12 [*Ecotourism in Northern Thailand*](#) by Glen Hvenegaard
- July 19 [*Ecotourism in the Himalayas : the Nepalese experience*](#) by Elizabeth Kalbfuss
- July 26 [*New weapon in war on micronutrient deficiencies*](#) by Michael Boulet
- August 2 [*Breeding a better bean : the horizontal resistance approach*](#) by Douglas Powell
- August 9 [*High maize yields offer hope for Burundi farmers*](#) by Andrew Ker and Dunstan Malithano
- August 16 [*Aboriginal tourism in Venezuela : walking lightly on the land*](#) by Lauren Walker
- August 23 [*Yucape Project : economic development in Mexico's Yucatán Peninsula*](#) by Chris Hayes
- [*Knowledge economy and the social economy : university support for community*](#)

- August 23 [*enterprise development as a strategy for economic regeneration in distressed regions in Canada and Mexico*](#) by Greg Macleod, Bruce McFarlane and Charles H. Davis
- August 30 [*Map Maker simplifies cartography in the field*](#) by Curt Labond
- September 6 [*Protecting Mexico's tropical forests : the Calakmul model forest program*](#) by Michael Boulet
- September 13 [*Teaching mixed - market economics in Havana*](#) by Roula el-Raifi
- September 20 [*Road to democracy in Sub-Saharan Africa*](#) by André Lachance
- September 27 [*Sustainable hillside agriculture in Colombia*](#) by Ronnie Vernooy
- October 4 [*Assessing and monitoring sustainable development in Colombia*](#) by Rhoda Metcalfe
- October 11 [*Fungus fights cereal killer in Africa*](#) by Philip Fine
- October 18 [*Levelling the playing field for international trade*](#) by Henry F. Heald
- October 25 [*Putting a price on indigenous knowledge*](#) by Jennifer Pepall
- November 1 [*Lessons from Canada's tobacco war*](#) by Lauren Walker
- November 8 [*Bringing tropical organic products North*](#) by Kirsten Kozolanka
- November 15 [*Emerging southern markets fueling global economic growth*](#) by Curt Labond
- November 22 [*Costs of mining in Latin America*](#) by Steve Hunt
- November 29 [*Tradition among the Gran Sabana Pemón*](#) by John Eberlee
- December 6 [*PAN Mongolia experience*](#) by Geoff Long
- December 13 [*Protecting natural resources : bioaccess legislation in Laos*](#) by Richard Littlemore
- December 20 [*Building one's house of adobe*](#) by André Lachance
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INTEGRATION: A SKEPTIC'S VIEW

For the most part, we assume integration is a good thing. We talk quite blithely about integrated rural development or integrated river basin management. Of course, in some sense, such integration is highly desirable. All too often, sectoral policies and programs have been implemented with little concern for, if not sheer ignorance of, their broader effects. However, I am less concerned with integration as a practical tool for implementing policy than as an analytical concept for developing policy.

ANALYSIS PARALYSIS?

I see at least three problems with integration in analysis. First, integration tends to reduce intellectual rigour. It is a fact of life that affects all inter-disciplinary and, to a lesser extent, multi-disciplinary, research. True, academic disciplines often become straitjackets on innovative thinking. But those disciplines did not evolve entirely for their own sakes and they do, in the end, have some meaning. By obscuring those boundaries, making us all into generalists, we risk achieving what one observer called "profound superficiality".

Second, as we integrate across analytical lines in the logical attempt to emulate the real world, the very complexity of the process typically forces us to ever higher levels of abstraction. Hence, we move further and further from policies that can be applied to that real world.

Third, and perhaps most important, I worry that by integrating analytically and deriving policies on the basis of that integration, we are stepping beyond the role of analysts and playing politician. I am not arguing that a clear line exists between value-free analysis and value-laden politics. Rather, our most appropriate analytical role is to present alternatives and suggest how they will work under various scenarios, but not to propose the integration itself.

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