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Whose Journey to Self-Reliance? Participation in the Journey to Self-Reliance and the Land-Grant Imaginary

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Abstract

Land-grant university and civil society development actors have long partnered with local and global communities to eliminate food insecurity. Despite the common aim of addressing food insecurity as a wicked problem, their approaches and designs differ in scope and scale. Similarly, levels of local stakeholder participation in agricultural development historically vary reflecting the complexity in relinquishing hierarchal decision-making power. In this pilot study, we investigated how participation is framed within the United States Agency for International Development's (USAID) policy, "The Journey to Self-Reliance". Subsequently, we sought to understand the implications of this framing on land-grant universities' agricultural development aims in addressing global food security. We drew upon Fairclough's Critical Discourse Analysis and Pretty's typology of participation in sustainable agriculture to analyze the inaugural speech launching the policy framework by the former USAID administrator. We also held two focus groups with development actors at two land-grant universities. Findings indicate local participation of governments, citizens, and civil society to be important. However, governmental participation may be contingent on accountability to both USAID and the private sector indicating an increased commitment to neoliberal ideology. The focus group themes identify self-reliance and its journey as prescriptive and at times, neocolonial, raising questions about participatory possibilities. The final theme illustrates land-grant praxis from participants as they advance visions for centering local partner needs through more equitable decision-making and resource sharing. We conclude with considerations for future research to more deeply understand the implications of "The Journey to Self-Reliance" policy through a CDA lens.

Keywords: Agro-ecology, Extension, Theory and Practice, Qualitative Research, Community Development

Introduction

Few extension and development practitioners would likely dispute the global imperative to address food insecurity. Since their inception, land-grant universities (LGU) have sought to increase food production and economic development locally and more recently, globally (Hudzik & Simon, 2012; Peters, 2006). The strengths of LGUs in agricultural development led to a long-standing partnership between the federal government's United States Agency for International Development (USAID) and universities (Hudzik & Simon, 2012). For USAID, agriculture and food insecurity continue to be priorities as they spent 900 million dollars on agricultural projects globally in 2019 to combat the continued global crisis of food insecurity (United States Agency for International Development, 2020).

The persistence of food insecurity and how to solve it varies among development actors as problems and solutions are framed differently. Anderson and colleagues (2021) introduce a continuum of these frames according to how they enable or disable agroecology. At one end of the spectrum is food sovereignty, a rights-based frame challenging the inequities of the current food system by asserting the human right to food, ecological protection, and community decision making over the food system (Anderson et al., 2021; Holt-Giménez et al., 2012; Jarosz, 2011; Patel, 2010; Wittman et al., 2010). The other end of the spectrum is “feed the world” promoting increased production and trade without centering human, social, or ecological protections (Anderson et al., 2021; Holt-Giménez et al., 2012; Jarosz, 2011).

Like others, we identify food insecurity as a wicked problem because its complexity means it cannot be solved by a single technical intervention (Rittel & Webber, 1973). Instead, wicked problems require multiple disciplines, knowledges, and approaches—especially participatory ones (Ravetz, 1999). Since gaining prominence in the 1990s, participatory approaches have been widely adopted by mainstream development agencies. Many argue that participation has been flattened and largely separated from its origins of stakeholder liberation and empowerment (Arnstein, 1969; Chambers, 1997; Krause, 2014; Kumba, 2003; Pretty, 1995). In response, some development scholars advocate for a shift in recognizing how Western scientific knowledge and localized, situated, and indigenous knowledges together play a crucial role in addressing global food security (Collins & Mueller, 2016; Coolsaet, 2016; Fraser, 2017; Martínez-Torres & Rosset, 2014; Pimbert, 2018; Rajasekaran et al., 1994).

Notions of self-reliant development are also increasingly common as is evidenced by the USAID’s recent release of the comprehensive policy called “The Journey to Self-Reliance” (J2SR). This guidance spans all of USAID’s program areas and is intended to end the need for development aid once self-reliance is achieved (Green, 2018). In this pilot study, we sought to understand how participation is operationalized in J2SR, and what the implications of this representation are on land-grant university agricultural development praxis. Specifically, this research is framed by the following questions: Within the announcement of the Journey to Self-Reliance, how are social actors represented? How is participation framed? What ideologies inform these representations? What are the implications of these ideologies on international development through land-grant institutions?

Theoretical Framework

We organized this pilot research using *Critical Discourse Analysis* (CDA) by Norman Fairclough (1992, 2003) and Jules Pretty's (1995) typology of participation for sustainable agriculture. CDA was employed because of its utility in uncovering invisible and embedded power relations in specific instances of practice (Fairclough, 1992). Fairclough’s theory views discourse as three levels of textual, discursive, and social practice. The textual level focuses on the linguistic elements of grammar, word choice, verb tense, and word associations as modes of power. The second layer of discursive practice addresses how actors consume, interpret, modify, and reproduce text. The final level focuses on discourse as reflections of larger social forces such as ideology or social movements of resistance (Fairclough, 1992, 2003). Pretty’s (1995) typology conceptualizes participation along a continuum of power distribution. He defines participation as power over decision-making, and so each step on the continuum represents the degree to which local actors hold power in agricultural development projects. The continuum ranges from participation as a pretense at the start to community control at the end.

Methods

This pilot project proceeded in two steps. First, we analyzed the transcript of USAID Former Administrator Mark Green's speech announcing "The Journey to Self-Reliance" at the Concordia Summit. The Concordia Summit is a non-partisan, cross-sectoral event focusing on global issues (Concordia, 2018). It is common in CDA to analyze a small selection of text because of the analytical depth, and we chose a speech because it represents embedded power relations between governmental agents and the targeted audience (Fairclough, 1996, 2003; Luke, 1997). The CDA focused on how actors and their participation are represented. Every statement was coded according to modal and evaluative language. Modality is a linguistic scheme conveying obligations and expectations (deontic) and truth or predictive statements (epistemic). We used Halliday and Matthiessen (2013) modality schema to code statements according to three epistemic levels of high (certainly), medium (probably), and low (possibly) and three deontic levels of high (must), medium (will), and low (may). Evaluation focuses on underlying values conveyed through the use of desirable or undesirable language (Fairclough, 2003).

Secondly, we convened two focus groups with nine international food security practitioners from two land-grant universities. Of the nine participants, five hold formal extension roles with others engaged in community development or research elsewhere. Each focus group lasted 90-minutes and followed an open-ended approach. The focus group began by asking participants about their general perceptions of "The Journey to Self-Reliance" followed by a brief presentation of the Critical Discourse Analysis results from the speech. Participants were then asked for their reactions, implications for their own work, and implications for land-grant universities at large.

We also followed the criteria of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability as outlined by Lincoln and Guba (1985). Credibility was maintained through data triangulation through the use of focus groups. Participants were invited to read the selected policy text in advance, and at the focus group, we presented the analysis of the discourse which included direct quotations. Through this framework, we argue the focus groups in tandem with the CDA analysis serve to triangulate the findings. Transferability is maintained through "thick description" that connects the data to other contexts such mechanisms include a diverse sample (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). We employed thick description through the use of explicit methodological steps as well as direct quotations for the analyses. Moreover, our sample crossed eight units at two land-grants. Dependability and confirmability are maintained through the explicit documentation of methodological and paradigmatic decisions (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Results

We present five key themes from our pilot study. The first two themes primarily stem from the textual analysis of the speech. The remaining three themes derive from the focus group data. The first theme points toward the importance of local government involvement to USAID's policy as Mark Green's Speech (MGS) mentioned governments 47 times compared to other actors at less than 17. While their participation is important, it may be viewed as a desire rather than a right. This point is illustrated here:

Development, instead, is done country-by-country. We need to understand where a country has been, how [it's] gotten to today. But more importantly, we need to understand where a country **wants to go**. What does the future look like? What do **they want it to look like?** (MGS)

Moreover, the participation of local governments may be conditional based on upward accountability measures. More specifically, these measures may be checked against the private sector in addition to USAID itself. The following segment illustrates this point:

So, as countries progress, when we take a look at the various metrics, a big part of it is how they treat opportunities for engagement with the private sector. And in terms of the tools that we provide, constantly talking with our private partners. (MGS)

The second theme is that the policy may epistemologically privilege citizens and civil society as important participants through the lens of respectability. That is, local citizens as stakeholders were explicitly mentioned in the speech using desirable adjectives illustrating prescribed mainstream standards of acceptable behavior. For instance:

And I remember walking along and coming across a **wonderful Ethiopian lady** who came up to me... And she said, 'I have a question.' She said, 'First off, I really appreciate this food. We need this grain. But the question I have is, "can you help me with irrigation so that I never have to ask you for food again?"' (MGS)

As we take a look at some of the most **thoughtful voices** around the world, over and over again we see this spirit expressed, the need to be independent, the need to be self-reliant. And it's that spirit that led us at USAID to craft a framework that we call the Journey to Self-Reliance. (MGS)

Citizens and civil society, and all of them with their leaders; **clear-eyed, sober-minded**, talking both about all the achievements that have been brought, but also what lies ahead and what needs to be taken on. (MGS)

In response to this framing, one focus group participant observes:

The language is kind of couched in respectability politics, and if you're not deemed as respectable, then you're not worth listening to. And that's really kind of dangerous when thinking about like self-reliance and wanting to rebuild nation-building, which is also just kind of kind of cringy, to begin with and thinking about, like, what is civilized and what is self-reliant, and all of that just has me thinking a lot, a kind of about what this program was intended to do.

No other actor is described in the ways civil society and citizens are. The only comparative might be how the work of USAID, the private sector, and India are described as a successful model because they are no longer receiving food aid. For example, "India, of course, is one of the great success stories in development in modern times, a country that not so long ago was receiving traditional food aid" and later when describing Indian water ATMs "created largely by private investment" as "proof of model" and "...the inspiration for where we hope we can all go in that journey to self-reliance" (MGS).

The third theme illustrates how the JSR framework might be reflective of a historical top-down and technical-rationalistic approach to development based on the perceptions of focus group participants responding to the CDA findings. Focus group participant 15 describes:

But that doesn't necessarily translate into the sort of process I see laid out here, which is intensely linear, intensely rationalistic. Looking for specific targets and outputs, as opposed to thinking a little bit more broadly and deeply about the contextualized conditions.

Participant 10 echoes this sentiment by incorporating the land-grant university specifically, so, while I'm a huge fan of land grants when they're at their worst, they're actually too top-down and too focused on technical rationalistic scientific solutions to problems that

they probably don't have the right assumption frame about because they're coming from non-localized position.

The fourth theme elucidates additional critique of Mark Green's Speech through the possibility that self-reliance is a newly branded form of neocolonialism. For example, focus group participant 15 offers "it seems to me to just more generally, that this is kind of old wine in new bottles". In support of this, participant six notes:

the language being couched to speak to a demographic that almost, it's a neocolonialism having lived in West Africa and seeing the influence that happens. You know, it's very much, you know, pushing an agenda that is not necessarily needed for the respective country...changing them from a traditional nation into a westernized nation, usually at their behest or detriment, so I find it, you know, challenging, I found a lot of challenges, a lot of language challenging and just how academics look at these nations, in terms like underdeveloped and third world.

The final theme centers on focus group participant concerns for the redistribution of functional and epistemic power between land-grant universities, USAID, and aid beneficiaries. For example, participant 10 noted, "So it's about really ceding power, ceding material resources.... where the land grant is a subprime you know, as a sub awardee, and does everything at the behest of that local institution". Of redistributing epistemic power, participant two asked:

Who and what are we putting at the center of discussion in terms of this research whose voices are being centered whose ideas are being centered? And whose understanding and definition of self-reliance are we leaning upon and is it the way that's really intentional in terms of supporting the countries that it's quote on quote designed to support?

Meanwhile, another participant offers a less radical view where power is redistributed but not entirely ceded "how can we as a university or institution, be that for our partners and not continue to center our ourselves [university name] at the forefront, but where are we can serve as coaches or just mentors?"

Conclusions, Implications, and Recommendations

This pilot study sought to understand how USAID's current policy toward self-reliance frames participation in agricultural development, and how these framings are perceived by land-grant actors focused on international food security development. Our analysis indicates the participation of citizens, civil society, and local governments are important although they vary. The framing of local government accountability as checked against the perceptions of the private sector may represent a form of upward accountability where aid compliance is evaluated against the funding agency and the capital interests driven by the private sector. This implies a likely increase to neoliberal ideology as a form of "good governance" wherein failure to demonstrate market-centered progress can result in discipline by an aid organization (Zanotti, 2011). Subsequently, where land-grant universities fit within this paradigm is uncertain and requires further investigation.

Secondly, we note promise in the framing of citizens and civil society as important participatory stakeholders. We caution, however, that this framing is at risk of falling trap to respectability politics, revealing how racism and behavioral expectations may work together to make participation contingent on the exhibition of behaviors deemed respectable or polite (Harris, 2003). The implication is that individuals who might not agree with the construction or

application of self-reliance could be labeled as not thoughtful and not sober-eyed, which may subsequently exclude their voices from participation.

Third, our study illustrates how land-grant actors contend with the idea of self-reliance as a recycled form of neocolonialism. This consideration addresses the tensions between the policy's described participatory importance by country-wide actors to determine their development trajectory and the predetermined concept of self-reliance by the agency. This same tension is reflected in the related theme of self-reliance as a technical and rationalistic approach rather than one of participatory nimbleness. Collins' (2017) work on development labs reinforces these tensions illustrating how universities are at risk of neocolonialism by perpetuating the technical prescriptions of development agencies.

Finally, our research underscores tensions embedded in power imbalances inherent in university-community projects. This theme speaks to both the ceding of material power, including financial and formal project leadership, to local institutions. For extension and development practitioners, these findings reinforce the need for greater attention to participation and power (Roberts & Edwards, 2017). To this end, our pilot study challenges scholar-practitioners to reflect on their roles, the contexts within which they operate, and the everyday ways in which they may be complicit in the replication of injustices as they work toward building self-reliance through their global food security praxis. To build upon this work, we recommend expanding this research to include a critical analysis of a broader corpus of JSR texts and additional land-grant university stakeholders.

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