



How Community Input to the Design of Public Policies Can Further Successful Implementation

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When new policies aimed at correcting national or community problems are designed, policymakers and bureaucrats should create opportunities for affected community members to participate in the formulation and implementation of policies that affect them. Such input ultimately produces better policies, because it can reveal problems otherwise unnoticed by expert planners. My research on divergent public policies in the United States and Nepal reveals specifically how and why successful implementation of public policies depends on the inclusion, early in the design process, of the people most affected.

Transitional Justice and Democratic Governance in Nepal

Following a decade-long internal armed conflict, I conducted 14 months of ethnographic research on transitional justice in Nepal. Transitional justice is meant to redress human rights violations experienced by victims of conflict, prevent armed conflict in the future, and establish democratic governance. Despite the fact that many of the people who fought in the conflict did so with the hope of greater social and political inclusion, the government failed to include victims of the conflict in the design of transitional justice policies that were intended to benefit them.

National policymakers and international donors I interviewed in Nepal frequently lamented their inability to engage with conflict-affected communities due to victims' "lack of education" and inability to speak English or Nepali. Meanwhile, in my interviews with them, victims of the conflict from the Tharu community in rural Nepal described their desire for greater inclusion in political decisions and greater access to government officials. They described feeling hindered by an ongoing unwillingness of others to understand or engage with their language. This barrier could have been easily overcome; many members of the Tharu community speak Nepali (the language of the government) and could translate for government officials and community members if they were willing to engage in conversations with people from the Tharu community.

In response to the impasse I discovered, I worked with victims on a short article published in English that outlined their hopes for inclusive policy regarding transitional justice in Nepal. The authors requested greater access to the judicial system, memorials for their deceased and disappeared loved ones, assistance creating sustainable livelihoods (i.e. cooperatives, microfinance, income generation projects), and truth about the fate of their loved ones who had been forcibly disappeared during the armed conflict. Despite the complications of the Nepali political context, many of these suggestions were financially and logistically feasible. Nevertheless, the Nepali government implemented exclusionary transitional justice policies and influential, donor-funded organizations effectuated programs that failed to attend to victims' recommendations and requests.

Because conflict victims were excluded, my research concludes, victims were dissatisfied with transitional justice policies and felt that Nepal's transition towards democratic governance failed to provide them with representation. Had victims been included in policy design with the same level of financial commitment, long-term outcomes would have been better, enhancing democratic participation and trust in government — which the implementation of transitional justice policies aim to achieve.

Farmers' Perceptions of Water-Quality Trading Policies in Tennessee

Exploring similar themes in a vastly different context for a project led by Caela O'Connell as one component of a larger multi-disciplinary study at the University of Tennessee, I conducted interviews with Tennessee farmers about a proposed water quality trading policy to improve water resources in the state. In this proposed program, farmers would take up practices to prevent agricultural run-off into waterways (for example, by fencing livestock or building grass or tree buffers) in exchange for credits that would be purchased by local waste treatment plants and utility boards. Often, rural waste treatment plants and utility boards struggle because their poor tax base does not provide enough funding.

Farmers' commitments to participate over the long term are essential to the success of water quality trading policies. However, such programs are typically implemented without farmers' input. We interviewed farmers before the state policy was designed and found that even though they were interested in participating in short-term trading programs, many of them would be ineligible. This meant that a long-term water quality trading program would not be a viable solution to reduce pollution in Tennessee's waterways. If, however, the policy were to be designed to include eligible farmers in trading for five to ten years while waste water treatment plants and utility boards had time to implement long-term changes, the policy could have long-lasting effects and improve water quality. Including farmers in early policy discussions would lead to more realistically designed programs nationally.

How Ethnographic Research Can Facilitate Collaborative Policy Design

In my ethnographic research in Nepal and the United States, I interviewed people whose participation is critical to successful policy implementation. From this research, I find that policies will not work as intended if the people who will be affected by a policy are prevented from contributing to the policy's design. Yet, experts formulating new policy efforts rarely consult the people who are most affected. Ethnographic research can be a useful tool for policy designers — either alone or combined with survey data. Open-ended interview questions give people affected by policies the opportunity to express their concerns and provide policy makers with nuanced feedback that will help them formulate programs to meet community needs and avoid foreseeable pitfalls to successful implementation.

Read more in Krista Billingsley, "Intersectionality as Locality: Children and Transitional Justice in Nepal," *International Journal of Transitional Justice* 12, no. 1, (2018): 64-87; Krista Billingsley, "Critical Conversations about Transitional Justice in Nepal: Building Collaborations for Victim-Centric Practice." Special Issue: Building Collaborations through Anthropological Research on the Missing, *Practicing Anthropology* 40, no. 2, (2018): 19-23; Caela O'Connell and Krista Billingsley, "A Place at the Well: the Imperative for Farmer Inclusion in Water Quality Policy Design," (under review).