

Socio-cultural Considerations in Environmental Policy Formulation and Implementation in Ethiopia, Zerihun Doda¹

Abstract

The idea of policies for holistic social development, healthy communities, and resilient socio-cultural institutions is one of the core issues of literature on sustainable society, development and environment. The nexus between national economic policies, resilient communities, and development is best understood in the context of policies for social development, particularly in terms of building resilient socio-cultural institutions, protecting communities, and ensuring useful traditional knowledge systems. Some research on environment and society in Ethiopia generally focus on policy failures and institutional dysfunctions leading to natural resource degradation and environmental exploitation. Others address increasingly insecure livelihood and political instability as a manifestation of unsuitable society, environment, and development. Further, policy instruments pertaining to environment, and the impact assessments are often analyzed in light of the legal perspective. This study aimed at understanding how existing environmental policy instruments define and represent socio-cultural matters as part of the environment policy and impact assessment frameworks of the country. The study adopted a qualitative method approach through analyzing existing policy documents and interviewing relevant actors. The study found out that while existing instruments do indeed address socio-cultural issues, the main problem lies in adequacy of representation of socio-cultural issues, particularly cultural resources (notably heritages, identities, belief systems social institutions, etc.). More so, the problem lies in the disturbing state of realizing the policy provisions for socio-cultural issues. Policy formulators and implementers' general level of socio-culturally sensitive awareness, attitude and commitment is a key gap.

Key words: socio-cultural issues, environmental policy, policy formulation, policy implementation, representation, Ethiopia, East Africa

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Introduction & Problem Statement

The issue of unsustainable development, environmental problems, climate change and their impacts on societal wellbeing and development are high on the international agenda (Conway & Schipper, 2011; Dove, 2014; Salick & Ross, 2009). Academic and policy literature on sustainable development and impact assessment call for careful considerations of socio-cultural issues in development policy formulations and practice. The Millennium Development Goals and the Agenda 2030- the Sustainable Development Goals have empirical and tangible points whereby issues of social and cultural significance are made part of the global policy dialogues (MEA, 2005; UN, 2015).

Some studies in Ethiopia show societal wellbeing, institutional resilience and livelihoods are being challenged through increasing risk of environmental problems and the inadequacy or poor implementation of

policy frameworks to contain these challenges (Zerihun 2015). These also explore how local communities in the age of increasing environmental problems and risks cope with socio-cultural and livelihood challenges in Ethiopia (Dira & Hewlett, 2016; Hameso, 2018). Socio-cultural impacts of development activities in Ethiopia exist showing the in-salutary effects of such activities on local communities (Zerihun, 2015; Abbute, 2004; Berisso, 2004).

Relevant articles of the Ethiopian Constitution (FDRE Constitution, 1995), the Environmental Policy of Ethiopia (FDRE EPA, 1997) and Culture Policy of Ethiopia (MoCT, 1997) provide standard setting frameworks of regulating development activities, environmental impact assessments and the protection for social institutions and cultural heritages; but these often are

seen as more of principles than of materialized realities (Keeley & Scoones, 2000), as well as imposed requirements for the sake of securing grants (Ruffeis, Loiskandl, Awulachew, & Boelee, 2010).

Recent national development policy and strategy documents (See, for example, National Planning Commission, 2016) provide for the inclusion of social issues along with environmental aspects in development impact assessment requirements. Further, the country has produced a range of regulations and protocols to guide financing of development projects within the framework of the country's development agendas and the climate resilient green economy, which in principle requires development projects to address social and cultural issues in planning and execution stages (See for example, Ethiopian Investment Authority, 2018; Development Bank of Ethiopia, 2017; Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change, 2015).

However, there is a dearth of information on how socio-cultural aspects are represented in existing policies and, above all, how are they being implemented in the assessment of development impacts arising from various national and regional development endeavors. Further, gaps exist on how policy implementers perceive socio-cultural matters, how they are implementing the policy provisions relating to safeguarding social and cultural lives and rights of the communities affected by various development endeavors.

There is a need for an analysis of the representation of these issues so as to assess how the country's policy frameworks and their implementations align with the international expectations and how they take on board globally legitimate conventions pertaining to socio-cultural aspects of environment and development. The objective of this study was, therefore, to

address socio-cultural considerations in environmental policy formulation and implementation in Ethiopia and how it fares in comparison with other African countries.

Methodology

The study maintains a paradigm of broadly qualitative, interpretivist research orientation. The strategy was cross-sectional, descriptive oriented. The data were generated on how socio-cultural issues are defined, scoped, and represented in policy instruments and the challenges facing implementation of policy provisions. Both primary and secondary sources of data were employed. The principle of *information redundancy* or *data saturation* determined the number of informants required for qualitative interviews. Key informant interview with 11 officers at the relevant federal offices was conducted. Initial plan of interviewing a total of 35 key informants was abandoned as the data that came from the 11 cases did a fairly good level of saturation. There was also a critical review of the contents including primarily the National Environmental Policy. Other relevant national instruments were also reviewed.

Key interview question guides were designed to generate data through interviewing the policy formulators and implementers. Question guides prepared in English were translated into Amharic and interview session were undertaken on face-to-face basis with each informant. The session was digitally audiotaped whenever feasible. Audio-recording was supplemented by careful notetaking.

Data transcription, management and analysis was done using Microsoft Excel 365 and MAXQDA 2020 computer assisted qualitative data analysis software. The former was used to prepare the transcribed data before importing to MAXQDA 2020. The data obtained through note taking and digital voice recording were organized

through transcription and summarization before being entered to the software. The interview data were transcribed using Google Live Transcription software and the transcribed data were then thoroughly edited for consistency, accuracy, formatting, and editorial issues. The data were exported to Microsoft Excel where they were prepared further for importation to MAXQDA 2020. Using MAXQDA 2020 Thematic Analysis approach, the responses were coded, and then thematic issues were identified.

Results

Description of Study Institutions & Informants

The primary field data as well as supporting secondary data mainly came from various institutions in the Federal Environment, Forestry & Climate Change Commission. Justification for focusing on this public service organization is already outlined in the methodological section. As a small scale, qualitative study, this project is a snapshot of issues from the focal point of the Commission, which is a major actor and mandate-holding government organ in issues pertaining to environmental policy formulations and how these impact social and cultural issues.

The key institutions within the Commission where our informants were based at included the Ethiopian Wildlife Protection Authority, the Ethiopian Biodiversity Institute and most of all, the various directorates in the Federal Commission for Environment, Forestry and Climate Change. The informants' posts in their institutions at the time of the interview ranged from Directors to Experts. Most of the informants held the post of a researcher. Four of the informants were experts at various levels of seniority; three were directorate generals, two were researchers and one, adviser. Regarding educational status, 56% of the informants held a master's degree, one had a

PhD and the rest, bachelor's degrees. Two of the informants were female, the rest males. All the eleven informants represented eleven different but related fields of studies, ranging from forestry and climate change, environmental law, biology, sustainable development and legal studies.

Socio-cultural Issues in Environmental Policy Instruments: Representation and Instances

Analysis of the responses shows that a range of issues defined as socio-cultural were reported to be included in the existing environmental policy and legal documents, mainly the national environmental policy. The issues, according to the informants, that counted as socio-cultural directly or indirectly ranged from health, livelihood, economic development, cultural values, to natural heritages. As the figure below shows, most of the informants referred to such issues as gender, community participation, cultural values, and indigenous knowledge. Mention is also made of health, livelihood, and impact assessments.

Sure enough, the list of issues defined as social and cultural in the existing environmental policy and related documents reflect the views and experiences of the informants, and they may not be as exhaustive enough. Nonetheless, it is interesting to observe that, in the views of the informants, the things defined as social and cultural in the policy documents are diverse enough. There is a note of mixing, however, social-cultural, and economic development issues, all seemingly lumped as social. So the definition of social-cultural issues as represented in the policy documents, at least the way the documents are perceived by the informants, seem to be incomplete, or rather not very clearly singling out social issues. Moreover, as some informants acknowledged, there is even more confusion as to *what cultural or socio-cultural issues are* and all the various issues, including

health, economic development, social security, livelihood, natural heritages, local community participation, and gender, are lumped together as *social issues*.

What are the actual instances of strategies, directives or regulations that make specific references to socio-cultural issues? Informants were asked to cite specific, tangible instruments that are in place in this regard, particularly, any specific references to socio-cultural issues as such.

The informants were more convinced, when asked this question that many of the now known national policy and strategy documents and proclamations can be taken as clear, tangible instances of the specific references made to socio-cultural issues in the documents. Informants cited instances of existing policy and legal documents that in one way or another make references to socio-cultural issues. For example, according to KII-03-: 2 – 2-2020, there are clear references to socio-cultural issues in the 1997 Environmental Policy; Environmental Impact Assessment Proclamation No. 299/2002 and the detailed implementation strategies; and Biosafety Law.

Another informant argued that clear references are made to indigenous knowledge registration and recognition by Ethiopian biodiversity Institute; and cultural and heritage sites conservation and development by Culture Tourism Ministry (KII-01-: 2 – 2; 2020).

Overall, social, and cultural issues are clearly referenced in the existing legal and policy documents of the country in both broader framework such as, for example, in the national Constitution of 1995 where it is declared that citizens have the rights to live in green and clean environments; the 1997 environmental policy; and narrow, sector-wise policies. In broad frameworks, the environmental policy generally aims at creating environment based on sustainable

economic development and stable social security. Social security, peace, indigenous knowledge, peoples' rights, local knowledge, and community participation issues are among the key pillars of the policy frameworks. According to this senior office, the various sector-wise policy documents and regulations further enshrine social issues as key components (KII-10-: 8 – 11; 2020).

As informants further noted, sector-wise policies and strategies such as the national disaster risk management strategy considers how cultural heritage may be affected through disasters. There are also gender aspects and indigenous people's rights. The national forestry policy has a key component called Participatory Forest Management (PFM). The PFM enshrines participation of the community and other stakeholders as central; this is about social issues. It gives due attention to the role of the community, considering the role of the local community and their indigenous and traditional knowledge in these areas.

The Climate Resilient Green Economic Strategy of Ethiopia is a specific policy that focuses on climate issues. It pays much attention to resilience which is about people and social issues: how to be resilient in terms of risks and shocks to any kind of shocks to climate change manifesting itself in such disasters as drought or floods. Furthermore, according to an informant, the 1999 Water Policy, although mainly part of environment, is also social security issue in that water is public resources and public access to clean water is very important. It's also viewed as part of human rights issue.

Similar things are reported to found in the conservation strategy of the country. For example, the beneficiary schemes recognize local communities because their roles are very high in protecting the resources. Similarly, in Wildlife Protection there is beneficiary scheme; much of the benefit should go to community empowerment

issues so that the community has the sense of ownership of the wildlife resource. The national environmental impact assessment proclamation, it is argued by some informants, makes vivid references to social issues, as it sees the impact on environment, economic development and social security as three key components. These are very important components in environmental impact assessment proclamation.

It appears that the informants are overall confident that social-cultural issues are well represented in the national policy instruments. But from the overall tone of the data, it is fair to state that the existing environmental policy and related documents duly represent social and cultural issues. As one informant argued, while the documents fairly represent and define social issues, the issue of *how complete and adequate* as well as *clearly making distinctions between social and cultural issues* are matters for further debate. It is fair to note that the *extent of completeness and with what level of sensitivity are social and cultural issues defined and considered*, etc. are open to question.

When the more nuanced aspect of 'social' and 'cultural' issues is considered, it becomes even clearer that the existing documents do not duly consider and define these aspects adequately. Nonetheless, as noted above, it does not seem fair to argue that environmental policy should be detailed and specific enough to cite cultural and social issues in more details. As a policy document, and above all, as primarily targeting environmental sustainability concepts, these documents may not necessarily and fairly be expected to cover social and cultural issues in the level desired by concerned professionals of socio-cultural matters. But given the long-accepted tradition in the environmentalism and conservation movements and paradigms where biodiversity conservation and economic

growth have been much emphasized and socio-cultural issues sidetracked, it is important to challenge and ask existing environmental policy frameworks whether they duly define, represent and consider social and cultural issues.

Policy Implementers' Awareness

Existence of socio-cultural issues in environmental policy instruments is one thing; awareness of the policy implementers with positive readiness to implement is another thing. Further still, the state of implementation of policy provisions for socio-cultural issues in various environmental policy documents is quite another important issue.

Although difficult to judge, given the limited cases we have in this small-scale study, policy implementers' awareness of socio-cultural issues as defined in existing environmental related policies and laws is overall reported as weak. Informants used various expressions for this: some stating it is 'satisfactory'; some argued policy implementers have 'little awareness.' As one informant noted, "In general, the awareness level is not bad but... there is no separate component for social issues during project development and implementation as well as monitoring and evaluation," (KII-05-: 9 - 9).

Another informant generally made a solid argument saying "Many awareness creation activities have been done in the last three decades. The laws and policies have been progressively improving and the problems are also getting more complicated and it requires lots of resource. But we must ask: has it got broad impact? ..." (KII-10-:25-25). This connotes awareness in general exists and it has improved, but the real question becomes: To what extent has it been implemented? We need to look at this in the following section.

Implementation State of , and Provisions for, Socio-Cultural Issues & Best Lessons

As the data show, overall, informants argued that while the existing policy and strategy documents are very impressive on the paper, their implementation state is woeful. Thus, to the question, "Are socio-cultural provisions in environmental related policy and legal instruments duly implement? If so, why?", all of our informants resoundingly replied that implementation is very weak. Quite wide-ranging reasons were offered for the failure, ranging from the challenge of implementing socio-cultural provisions in a multi-cultural, ethnically diverse society like ours; to lack of commitment and corruptive, selfish interests, as one informant noted: "Totally not implemented in our country because our politicians and implementers are selfish and rent-seekers," (KII-01-: 4 - 4). Another informant called attention to problems in integrating social and cultural issues with environmental issues: "They are not being implemented because economic and social issues have not been properly managed in integrated manner to ensure sustainable development," (KII-06-: 4 - 4)"

Other informants called attention to commitment citing it as very important. Even if there is proper awareness, it is difficult to implement given lack of commitment, as one informant noted: "They are not implemented correctly. This is because most communities and stakeholders have awareness problems. Even among those who have an understanding, there is also an unwillingness to implement due to the problem of negligence and commitment," (KII-07-: 4 - 4).

In general, the main reasons for poor implementation of socio-cultural provisions in environmental policy instruments may be categorized as: limited awareness and knowledge on the issue; lack of commitment; poor integration and

coordination: lack of uniform implementation strategies across the board; social and cultural issues given very low attention in developmental project activities; and low implementation capacity.

In summary, while existing environmental policy and legal instruments are impressively crafted to include social and cultural issues, the provisions are generally poorly implemented. Of course, some level of implementation achievements may be cited, and indeed our informants made mentions of some model cases whereby socio-cultural issues are duly getting implemented. For example, as one informant mentioned, the community-forestry conservation and the participatory forestry programs may be a good model examples of implementation. A case in point may be that which is found in south-western Ethiopia and in western Oromia regions where robust community conservation and forestry programs have considered social and cultural issue, acknowledging the values and role of local knowledge and indigenous resource management practices. Socio-cultural issues in such endeavors as gender participation, participatory decision-making, benefit-sharing, sustainable use and conservation of forest resources, conservation of cultural and natural heritages, promotion of forest and biodiverse-friendly religious worldviews, etc. may be cited as good cases.

But apart from these limited cases, overall, the implementation state is generally reported as very poor and in need of reformation. To be fair, it is reasonable to acknowledge the good lessons in participatory forestry management areas, and in the now relatively stronger emphasis being put on the need for social, health and cultural impact assessment when reviewing and approving development projects. Encouraging community participation, providing for protecting cultural heritages and local knowledge systems, safeguarding

the rights of marginalized social groups and mainstreaming gender and youth matters in environmental related policy and strategy instruments may thus be acknowledged as good signs of implementing.

However, when taken overall, translation of policy provisions for social issues and cultural values in environmental policy formulations and implementation have remained elusive, weak, and very much wanting, with much stress still being laid on the purely physical-environmental aspects and the economic growth initiatives overshadowing the more soft power issues of cultural heritages, social institutions, local knowledge systems and world views, which are being considered very crucial part of the environment and conservation endeavor as a whole at global stages.

Key Challenges Facing Policy Implementation

What factors exist that impede the realization of socio-cultural policy provisions in environmental policy instruments? There is no lack of issues standing out as challenges. Many factors work towards limiting the realizations of policy provisions, in general not just for socio-cultural issues. The problem ore intensifies when it comes to 'soft power' of socio-cultural aspects. The various factors mentioned by the informants, indeed may be regarded as a representative sample of factors, the size of sample notwithstanding.

The issues are the same issues that also showcase in other areas. Staff turnover and the resultant institutional memory loss is a key issue that is hampering implementations in many public service organizations. Lack of capacity (financial, knowledge and skills) are also very important. Much more emotionally charged factors are the issues of lack of political will, the 'silo approach', fragile peace and security conditions, motivation and commitment from both

policy formulators and implementers. The socio-cultural provisions in environmental policy documents have suffered from these assorted and interlinked challenges which are very much pronounced in the country.

Discussion

The issue of unsustainable development, environmental problems, climate change and their impacts on societal well-being and development are high on the international agenda (Conway & Schipper, 2011; Dove, 2014; Salick & Ross, 2009). Academic and policy literature on sustainable development and impact assessment call for careful considerations of socio-cultural issues in development policy formulations and practice. The Millennium Development Goals and Agenda 2030- the Sustainable Development Goals have empirical and tangible points whereby issues of social and cultural significance are made part of the global policy dialogues (MEA, 2005; UN, 2015).

Literature on environmental policies and the definition and representing of socio-cultural issues is generally patchy, particularly in Ethiopian context. However, some source suggests that there has been an increasing acceptance and recognition of social and cultural issues in environmental policy formulations in the recent decades across the world (Cahill, 2002). Despite such increasing recognition, hazy definitions and misrepresentations of socio-cultural issues when considering policy formulations in the hard, physically oriented fields is still a challenge (Sagnia, 2004).

Viewed from the literature context, the result on whether, how and to what extent socio-cultural issues are defined and represented in Ethiopia's environmental policy documents may be considered as technically and conceptually sound, given the improving trends in the past recent decades. Ethiopia's policy instruments on paper are generally

touted as very impressive and progressive, these including those addressing socio-cultural issues in environmental policy formulations (Ruffeis et al., 2010).

Many policy and strategy instruments in recent years have been put forward, that directly or indirectly provide provisions for socio-cultural issues. This appears to be much so in the recent trends in putting up frameworks and instruments for guidance of social, economic, and environmental development projects. The national constitution, environmental policy, and a host of other policy instruments all make some references to social and cultural issues (FDRE EPA, 1997; FDRE-the CRGE Initiative, 2011).

Some most recent policy and strategy documents seem to draw home the message of the importance of socio-cultural nexus with environmental and economic sustainability. The national social and environmental impact assessment frameworks and in light of this, many initiatives from the private and para-governmental sectors have made efforts in putting forward policy directives and guidance on how best to consider social and cultural issues in the industrial development processes (DBE, 2017; EIA, 2018; MOST, 2016; Ministry of Industry, 2014).

While these and other empirical sources suggest the definition and representation of social and cultural issues can be considered fair and commendable, many of the problems are linked to the desired level of possessing appropriate awareness and attitudes towards socio-cultural issues, the level of actual implementation of the policy provisions and thus the scale of desired positive impacts that have accrued from the existing policy and legal frameworks.

With respect to these issues, the findings of the study as presented above compares with the empirical studies documenting the state

of the successes of environmental policies and environmental impact assessment tools. The implementation status of environmental policy and impact assessment proclamations in the general sense has been assessed by many scholars, particularly from legal studies perspectives (see for, example Abdi, 2012; Bayou, 2008; Damtie, 2008; Gubena, 2016; Ruffeis et al., 2010). These studies generally focus on the implementation lacunae and not necessarily on whether and to what extent provisions for social-cultural issues are addressed and implemented. An unpublished master thesis report makes a good attempt at assessing how Ethiopia's environmental policies and impact assessment proclamations treat socio-ethical issues (see Taye, 2019, *Is Ethiopia's Environmental Policy ethical?* See also Desta, n.d., Environmental Policy for Ethiopia's Sustainable Social and Economic Development: A Working Paper, n.d.).

The empirical studies make reference to the most pressing factors that impede proper implementation of environmental impact assessment and similar policy instruments, although they do not make specific reference to socio-cultural issues. Nonetheless, the issues they raise as key challenges are also most notably the ones that are presented above. For instance, Taye (n.d.), Damtie (2008), Gubena (2016) argue that awareness limitations, resource shortages, and above all low political will and commitment, along with also knowledge and technology gaps are among the key factors that impede proper implementation of environmental policies and instruments in Ethiopia.

Some sources suggest that Ethiopia has put in place one of the best policies and legal instruments concerning environment, social development, and the nexus of society, development, and environment. The 1997 environment policy is a very comprehensive and cogent one (Abdi, 2012; S. Edwards, 2010; Gubena, 2016; Janka, 2012), the poor

implementation state notwithstanding. Perhaps, it may be fair to cite some cases in Ethiopia, as part of policy supported and promoted matter, the issue of participatory forest management (PFM), such as the case in southwestern Ethiopia and in western Oromia, which are taken as best lessons of environmental and conservation policies marriage amicably with social and cultural goals, some of the cases featuring in UNSECO World Heritage and Man & Biosphere Program (Vaughn, 2010; Woldemariam & Fetene, 2010; UNESCO, 2014).

When we situate the findings in the context of developing countries in general and (East) Africa, it is generally argued that Ethiopia has maintained a unique trajectory in its formulation and implementation of policies on environment, society, and culture, although the country has been consistently an active role player in the United Nations engagements pertaining to socio-cultural and environmental issues (EBI, 2014). However, like other African countries, the formulation and implementation of environmental policies in Ethiopia often suffered from a Eurocentric and conservation-science emphasis and a detachment from local socio-cultural realities. This may be understood from related study findings in African context. The processes and lacuna of environmental policy formulation in Ghana (Ayee, 1998), Nigeria (Wonah, 2017), Kenya (Nasong'o, 2018), West Africa in general (IUCN, n.d.), Egypt (Nadia Hegazi, 2004), have been cogently discussed and the findings there have very relevant bearings to the present study.

Overall, as these and other related studies indicate, the proper understanding of the dynamics of processes of environmental policy formulations and implementations in general and their representation and definition of socio-cultural issues in Ethiopia and Africa in general requires careful

scrutiny and the need to taking into account the global influences, local traditions and the range of the power politics and socio-economic dimensions (Keeley & Scoones, 2000).

Conclusion

Ethiopia's Constitution provides clear support for social and cultural goals linking with environmental rights and values. It stipulates that citizen have the rights to live in green and clean environments, to participate in national development initiatives affecting their lives, and obliges governments and other actors to uphold these goals. Existing environmental policy and the various proclamations and strategy documents on environment, pollution, development, and social inclusion all provide for social and cultural issues, promoting integration of local lives, livelihoods, and beliefs and identities with sustainable environments and economic development. The environment policy is hailed as very much replete with socio-economic and cultural goals, with issues of participation, the role of local communities, indigenous knowledge, bio-friendly religious worldviews and institutions, and benefit-sharing mechanisms very much showcasing the pages of the various policy documents. Sector-wise policy and strategy documents likewise do not lack focus on how social and cultural issues may be entertained. Respect and recognition for local role and knowledge in biodiversity and natural resource conservation, and the varieties of age-old local practices relevant for national and economic and social development, peace, are generally referenced in several policy documents.

However, the main problem lies in adequacy of representation of socio-cultural issues, particularly cultural resources (notably heritages, identities, belief systems social institutions, etc.). More so, the problem lies in the state of realizing the policy provisions

for socio-cultural issues. Policy formulators and implementers' general level of socio-culturally sensitive awareness, attitude and commitment is a key gap. Often, policy formulators and implementers so often ignore socio-cultural issues, mainly out of low sensitivity and sometimes due to bias and low concern for these elements.

With all these challenges impeding the proper implementation, including capacity and technology limitations, lack of coordination and integration, low motivation and commitment as well as low level of capacity and awareness, some showcases exist that may best exemplify what happens when socio-cultural values and institutions are duly represented and considered both in paper and practice, this putting Ethiopia in the UNECSO world map.

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