

The Intricacy of Policy Analysis: A Book Review

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*Mitos Tambang untuk Kesejahteraan: Pertarungan Wacana
Kesejahteraan dalam Kebijakan Pertambangan*

[The Myth of Mining for Welfare; The Welfare Discourses
Struggle in Mining Policy]

Hendra Try Ardianto

Yogyakarta: PolGov UGM (2016)

Much has been written about mining projects and the contestation of these projects' development in the political science/policy analysis literature. The different perspectives that are employed to analyse this issue to some extent is enriching the academic debates but at the same time also increase the difficulty of understanding this complex problem. As a result, navigating the overall academic discussion in the intricate subject matter is not an easy task. Instead of outlining the overall landscape of mining contestation in the literature, choosing a particular approach and being consistent with this choice is a strategic decision that may result in a high-quality academic work. Following this recipe, Ardianto chose the constructivist approach by employing Laclau and Mouffe's discourse analysis to better understand the mining project contestation in Rembang, Central Java, Indonesia.

The difficulty of placing this book in the academic debate is also higher due to the decision to frame the debate about a mining project within the policy analysis field. Policy analysis is by no

means a simple area as it has a particular historical background and has been evolving tremendously since the end of the World War II. Despite the ostensibly simple and straightforward thoughts of Harold Laswell—often mentioned as the policy analysis founding father, policy analysts rarely do justice to his ideas about the art of policy analysis. The domination of the economic discipline and their positivistic approach to this field is seen as one of the culprits to this complicated issue.

Before delving deeper into the book's contribution particularly to the broader field of policy analysis, this review must spare some spaces to explain the content of the book. This approach is necessary since the book is written in the Indonesia language while the target audience of this journal does not always converse in this language. Furthermore, the elaboration on the book's content will become the entry points to the more critical discussions in the subsequent part of this review.

Promoting Counter-Narrative

The book starts with a fundamental question about resource extraction that ignites the debate around mining activities. Should or should not natural resources be extracted or unearthed? What purpose does it serve? To these questions, Ardianto has a clear answer toward the necessity to keep the resources intact since it serves the long-standing harmonious relationship between human and nature in Rembang.

The book's argument against extraction is built based on a critical review of the policy-making processes and the train of thoughts that are promoted to justify the pro-extraction policy. Ardianto explains that the alliance between the state and the cement industry launched a narrative about the mining industry as the saviour to get people in the district of Rembang out of their poverty. This narrative is carefully crafted and perpetually promoted in various forums to influence the public to accept that the mining operation

in the area will provide needed welfare to the local community. In the process, the state and the extraction corporations manipulate the law, while mobilizing lay people and experts to actively promote this cause and marginalizing the dissenting opinions.

On the other hand, some farmers in the project site expressed their disagreement toward the cement factories' development plan. In doing so, these farmers produce a counter-narrative via the community's own vision of welfare. This debate is partly in response to the idea of welfare as an objective that is promised by the industry and also to defend the current agricultural practices in the area. For the farmers, their current livelihood has guaranteed a well-being for generations and protecting this way of living is a must to maintain the mutual relationship between humans and nature. Therefore, the farmers clearly drew their ideas from a different imagination about welfare and development compared to those of the state and the extraction companies.

The contestation between these two conflicting imaginations about welfare is at the heart of the discussion in the book and the writer illustrates thoroughly how one meaning is constructed by the powerful while the counter-meaning is developed by the powerless. Furthermore, policy analysis should be oriented toward giving the voice to the powerless and helping to promote their counter-narrative. This advocacy principle is a key point of view because the ability to influence, dominate and subjugate one meaning to another will decide who will have the final say about the fate of the cement industry in the district. Nonetheless, the outcome of this struggle is still in the balance as the conflict is yet to be resolved.

Another key message in the book is crafted from the critique toward the inadequacy of the classical positivist policy analysis model that is operationalized based on the technocratic and procedural approaches. These approaches in policy analysis are basically driven by the notions of objectivity and the apolitical nature of experts and so-called 'impartial' government officials in decision-making processes. Furthermore, this strand of idea concluded that

every decision is always made based on rational considerations for all after carefully taking into account the available options. This book has precisely shown the limitation of this approach to policy analysis and the pitfalls that it has created for policy analysis study in Indonesia.

So What?

The writers' background as an activist who supports the farmers' struggle against the cement factory establishment is an honest disclosure that deserves an appreciation. To some extent, this personal history has strengthened the capacity of the writer to dig deep into the farmers' counter-narrative and increased the quality of his analysis in dissecting the problematic narrative of welfare from the perspective of the state and the extractive industry. However, one could not find any clear direction toward practical steps that can/should be done next after the lengthy analysis in the book.

The absence of recommendation from the analysis is notable because the book disregards the traditional policy analysis which often provides cliché recommendations that are not feasible. Nonetheless, the decision to not provide any recommendations for the policy problem has left readers to inevitably ask the 'so what?' question. After the detailed analysis, it is a bit of a pity when the book is ended with a conclusion about a problem of power imbalance—"The state's promise of welfare is actually a forced effort to destroy the farmers' own welfare" (p. 225, *the reviewer's translation*)—but does not offer any strategy to overcome this problem. If the writer is promoting a view that policy analysts should take a side—especially toward the powerless, in the on-going policy debate, then his policy analysis results hardly provide any inputs to the farmers' struggle in Rembang. Therefore, the book actually shows an inconsistency between the writer's opinion about the ideal concept of policy analysis that should actively advance the power struggle and his end product of policy analysis in the book.

Another critique to policy analysis in the book stems from the positivistic tendency of the policy analysis area and further translation of this trend into the technocratic and procedural policy-making. Nonetheless, the writer seems to overly undermine the function of expert judgment and procedure in policy-making.

Regardless of one's preference for policy-making theory, experts play a particular role in policy-making. This is not to say that experts can solely define good public policy, but experts' involvement is needed to at least make sure that people use the already available knowledge to make important public decisions. This is not to say that experts will always be objective and neutral in a highly controversial public policy, but the conflict of interest in an expert judgment should be made explicit to scrutinize bias opinion. In other words, despite the particular role of experts in policy-making, their judgment should not be separated from the power relations in the policy-making processes.

To some extent, Ardianto is also using expert judgment when he develops the argumentation against the cement industry. This fact is particularly true when the book mentions that the cement industry is the biggest greenhouse gas emitter in Indonesia (p. 129). For sure, only experts in greenhouse gas measurement can come up with this calculation and thus, the book also demonstrated that to completely undermine the role of the expert in policy-making is difficult.

The book also protests the role of procedure in policy-making overwhelmingly. It illustrates a procedure in policy-making in a way that it is merely a rule that is defined by the powerful to advance their personal interests. This extreme stance is not totally precise as the rules of the game are needed for a number of useful reasons. Nonetheless, another extreme stance that policy-making procedure is the ultimate answer to a credible public policy is also amiss. Therefore, acknowledging the useful role of procedure in policy-making and at the same time critically examining the power-relations in implementing this procedure is the closest thing to a productive

and critical academic inquiry. In practice, this critical approach can be translated into an understanding that there is a set of processes that are formally developed to get to a policy but merely following these processes is not enough to ensure an accountable policy.

However, it should be noted that Ardianto does acknowledge the value of procedure in his policy analysis throughout the book. An example for this can be found in the section where he analysed the lack of compliance from the corporation toward the mining license regulations in Indonesia (p. s144). Therefore, totally disregarding the rules of the game or procedural process in policy-making has proved to be not a practical option in policy analysis.

Beyond the inconsistencies between the writer's understanding on policy analysis and his policy analysis techniques in the book, this publication touched a number of aspects that deserve to be critically discussed (e.g. the use of Laclau and Mouffe's discourse analysis and the current mining project controversy). However, this article deliberately tackles the policy analysis aspects due to the limited space and the focus that can be given in a short review.

Improving Policy Analysis

Ardianto's book provides a perfect opportunity to reignite the discussion on policy analysis further. Literature in this field has shown that there are two steps that can be done to improve the policy analysis quality. First is to introduce the 'bounded rationality' concept which explains the limited application of rationality in policy-making. Second is to take into account the dimensions of 'power' in the analysis.

One of the earliest scholars who explained the limited application of rationality in policy analysis is Charles Lindblom with his idea about policy as a 'muddling through'. In this concept, policy is seen as complex and contingent so that actors in policy-making can only proceed in small and incremental steps. Hence, a policy development and change are likely to occur evolutionary rather than

revolutionary. The incremental and step by step policy change are interpreted further as a theoretical critique from Lindblom towards the perfect rationality in policy-making.

Another study that further explains the limitation of rationality in the policy-making processes was conducted by Anthony Downs who coined the 'issue-attention cycle' term. This notion emphasises the role of media in highlighting an issue for a certain period of time which at some point in the cycle tends to generate political response from the authority. This notion explains that policy does not always develop based on a particular plan, follow rational decision-making processes, and remain stable in the political agenda.

John W. Kingdon comes up with another concept to explain the political factors in policy-making processes via the 'windows of opportunity' concept. Here, Kingdon argues for three factors that simultaneously are needed in policy-making or policy change: a compelling problem, a technically viable (policy) solution, and a political circumstance that is right for a change. This equation is emphasizing, even more, the political variables as part of the addition to the rationality line of thought represented by the compelling problem and the technically viable solution.

In addition to limited rationality, putting power into the policy analysis is also an imperative. Generally, integrating power into the policy analysis can be structured from the three main approaches to power. The first branch stems from the discourse approach to power that emphasises the crucial role of idea and knowledge in creating a particular storyline to promote a certain policy. Ardianto's book is an example for the operationalization of this approach to policy analysis. The strengths of this approach lay in its ability to construct an alternative storyline that at the same time deconstructs the dominant storyline on a particular policy issue. The apparent limitation of this approach, as proved in this book, is its lack of ability in providing practical policy recommendations.

The second branch is developed from the (neo)pluralist understanding of power in which policy is defined as an arena

for contestation between various groups in society. An important contribution from this approach is the notion that the state is not a monolithic entity and that the policy-making involves state and non-state actors that are mutually dependent, despite the fact that they are defining their own strategy. One of the strengths of this approach for policy analysis is its potential ability to reveal the heart of decision-making in a seemingly complex policy network while one apparent limitation of this approach is its narrow focus on the elite policy-making processes.

The third branch is an extension to the institutional approach to power that results in a path-dependent pattern of policy-making. For this approach, policy processes unfold as part of a broader, relatively stable framework of policy-making, with more or less fixed problem definitions, actor relationships, and ways of policy implementation. Despite all of these, policy-making institutions need constant renewal in each policy-making process. This particular approach has a strength in explaining policy processes but lacks further practical examples in policy analysis compared to the other two previous approaches.

The aforementioned elaboration from the policy analysis literature is to show that this field has gone through a great length of development. Numerous scholars have discussed its complexity in great depths and developed branches or approaches that broaden the scope of policy analysis, and thereby, political science. Therefore, understanding each approach including their strengths and limitations may help contemporary policy analysts to reach a more informed decision.