

Polycentric Governance in Climate Change Policies

Key facts

- Globally and in Canada, current climate change mitigation and adaptation policies are polycentric because they include different levels (local, regional, national, international) and different sectors (public and private sector, NGOs, indigenous people).
- Polycentric Governance has the potential to facilitate tasks such as information sharing, coordination of activities, conflict resolution, trustworthiness and learning.
- Polycentric governance do not automatically translates into positive impacts in achieving climate change mitigation goals.
- Efforts to create functional institutional arrangements might exceed the actual implementation of strategies and action plans.

Introduction

The impacts of climate change are more evident everywhere. Rural people who depend on climate-sensitive resources (e.g. water supplies, farming land) are among the more vulnerable population affected by climate events such as heat waves, heavy precipitation, long droughts and intense hurricanes which have been more frequent around the world.

In the first decade of the 21st century, Elinor Ostrom proposed Polycentric Governance as an effective approach to address global environmental problems such as climate change. Ostrom challenged the idea that climate change policies should be in the hands of global organizations and proposed that the efforts of smaller-units (national government, sub-national government, companies and local communities) should also be recognized.

What is Polycentric Governance?

A form of decision making that involves **multiple levels** of authority and **multiple sectors** representatives under a shared system of rules to regulate their relationships.

Issue/Opportunity

- Current global climate change mitigation and adaptation policies are polycentric because they include different levels (local, regional, national, international) and different sectors (public and private sector, NGOs, academia, local communities), they have common rules negotiated at the United Nations' Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) and they have an internationally agreed common goal: limiting global warming to well below 2°C. However, the effectiveness of polycentric governance implementation is still a subject for debate.
- Despite their active participation, sub-national actors are often limited in financial resources and jurisdictional scope, therefore, climate change policies should emphasize the specific roles played by actors of different scales: International organizations and national governments regulate and provide financial support while sub-national organizations plan and implement climate change mitigation and adaptation projects taking into account their particular context.
- The theory suggests that three dimensions of polycentric governance are relevant to assess the effectiveness of this approach:
 - **Actors participation** in decision-making: While some scholars suggest that the actors involved in polycentric governance should have non-hierarchical relationships, other researchers claim that one core actor or few specific actors must have a leading role in decision-making to avoid competing and/or overlapping policies. However researchers from both streams recognize that neither of these scenarios guarantees positive impacts in goals achievement.
 - **Quality of governance**: The literature suggests that there can be different qualities or degrees of governance depending on the presence or absence of a number of functions such as: 1) Information sharing; 2) Coordination of activities (technical and/or financial); 3) Conflict resolution; 4) Trustworthiness and; 5) Learning.
 - **Impacts in goal achievement**: Polycentric governance might have positive, negative or neutral impacts in achieving emission-reductions targets.

What are some of the contributions of sub-national actors in Climate Change mitigation?

- ✓ 1,019 local and regional governments from 86 countries, have reported their emissions reduction targets on the carbon Climate Registry.
 - ✓ 7,494 cities and local governments committed to the Global Covenant of Mayors for Climate & Energy.
 - ✓ Up to 1,500 private companies have made commitments regarding energy efficiency and emissions reductions.
 - ✓ Civil society organizations have invested up to \$720 million dollars in green projects.
- ❖ Read *The Bonn-Fiji Commitment of Local and Regional Leaders to Deliver the Paris Agreement At All Levels* at:
<https://www.uclg.org/sites/default/files/bonn-fiji-commitment-of-local-and-regional-leaders.pdf>

The Pan-Canadian Framework on Clean Growth and Climate Change

The Pan-Canadian Framework has four main pillars: 1) pricing carbon pollution; 2) complementary measures to reduce emissions; 3) adaptation and resilience building; 4) innovation, clean technology, and jobs creation.

This planning document was developed with the provinces and territories and through engagement with businesses, NGO's and Indigenous peoples. Some examples of the collaborative elements that express the principles of polycentric governance are:

- ✓ The federal government has committed to ensuring that the provinces and territories have the flexibility to design their own policies to meet emission-reductions targets.
 - ✓ Commitment of the federal government to work with provinces and territories to complement and support their actions without duplicating them.
 - ✓ Strengthening the collaboration between our governments and Indigenous Peoples on mitigation and adaptation actions, based on recognition of rights, respect, cooperation, and partnership.
- ❖ Read the *Pan-Canadian Framework* at:

<https://www.canada.ca/en/services/environment/weather/climatechange/pan-canadian-framework/climate-change-plan.html>

Recommendation for policy-makers

Actors' participation: In practice, having one or two leading actors is needed to keep moving forward in climate change decision-making and implementation. Usually the natural leader is the federal government through its Ministry of the Environment. However the leader needs to keep other actors engaged and motivated by defining together clear strategies and action plans in which every actor has a task. Allowing actors to have a say in decision-making is another way to keep them engaged.

Information sharing: For adequate information sharing the tools (in-person fora, online resources, radio broadcasts, printed material) are important but to have a clear message (action plan, progress, challenges) is more relevant.

Coordination of activities: Technical and/or financial coordination is critical to multiply efforts and avoid duplicating activities. Investing in capacity development for local governments/organizations might lead to better and faster results.

Conflict resolution: Actors working together to solve a problem, climate change in this case, have usually a good attitude toward each other and they usually reach consensus when making decisions. However, internal rules are needed to solve potential conflicts.

Trustworthiness: Although this is a subjective value, it can be promoted by assuring transparency in decision-making and implementation. Regular meetings/activities might also help people to get to know and trust each other.

Learning: Sharing successful stories and best practices is a way to build in past experiences, avoid mistakes and keep moving forward in meeting targets.

Impacts: Although promoting all the functions explained above leads to high quality governance, it may not result in a positive impact in goals achievement, as expected. Efforts to create functional institutional arrangements (working groups/councils/committees) might exceed the actual implementation of strategies and action plans. Decision-makers must look for a balance between policy and practice.

Sources

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