



Tracing a pathway to success: How competing interest groups influenced the 2013 EU Common Fisheries Policy reform



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ABSTRACT

Adaptation of environmental policies to often unexpected crises is an important function of sustainable governance arrangements. However the relationship between environmental change and policy is complicated. Much research has focused on understanding institutional dynamics or the role of specific participants in the policy process. This paper draws attention to interest groups and the mechanism through which they influence policy change. Existing research offers conflicting evidence in regards to the different ways in which interest groups may affect change. This paper provides an in-depth study of the 2013 European Union Common Fisheries Policy reform – a policy change characterized by active interest group participation. It traces the activity of interest group coalitions to understand how they achieved influence under a changing policy context. The study involves interviews with interest group representatives, policy experts and decision-makers, document analysis of interest group statements and EU legislative documents. Findings identify the important role of coalition-building and informational lobbying for environmental interest group success in exploiting favorable socio-political conditions and influencing reform outcomes. An insight on interest group influence and its conditions contributes to our understanding of the complex dynamics of the environmental policy process as well as its implications for policy adaptation to environmental change.

“Luck Is What Happens When Preparation Meets Opportunity”

1. Introduction

Effectively managing the environment requires dealing with the complexity, change, and uncertainty that characterize interconnected social-ecological systems (SES) (Berkes et al., 2000; Holling, 2001; Liu et al., 2007). To address these challenges, SES scholars argue that environmental governance systems need to be adaptive to rapid and slow change processes, match the spatial and organizational levels of social-ecological dynamics and involve polycentric networks (Chaffin et al., 2014; Chaffin and Gunderson, 2016; Folke et al., 2005; Galaz et al., 2008). Existing governance arrangements, however, are often bound by path-dependent institutions, framings and power relations that influence adaptation and can lead to maladaptive lock-ins (Voß and Bornemann, 2011). Evidence for this can be seen in regional and global policy responses to climate change (Breunig et al., 2016), over-fishing (Aps et al., 2007), biodiversity loss (Smith et al., 2003) and other coupled social-ecological issues. Despite awareness and availability of information about social-ecological change and environmental crises, political decisions have often been slow in adapting to

such change and taking on sustainable approaches (Stål, 2015). At the same time research has shown examples of successful policy adaptations (e.g. Armitage et al., 2011; Hahn et al., 2006; Huitema and Meijerink, 2010). Understanding why and how policy responds and adapts to environmental change in some cases but not in others remains a major challenge.

The adaptation of policy to social-ecological change is greatly affected by institutional and social structures, beliefs, aims and strategies of political actors (Voß and Bornemann, 2011). Recent work has highlighted the importance of political processes within SES for understanding governance adaptation (Chaffin et al., 2014; Duit, 2015; Galaz et al., 2008; Sjöstedt, 2015; Voß and Bornemann, 2011). Focus has been put on drivers of and barriers to adaptation such as the structures that determine political and social interactions (e.g. institutions or social networks) (e.g. Brondizio et al., 2009; Cash et al., 2006; Folke et al., 2007; Galaz et al., 2008; Young, 2010) or the role of agency of actors that interact within such structures to bring about change (e.g. Berkes, 2009; Bodin and Crona, 2008; Huitema and Meijerink, 2010; Olsson, 2003; Westley et al., 2013). The interactions between individual agency and structural responses to change have been identified as crucial for policy adaptation (Galaz et al., 2008) yet less studied and

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understood. Though adaptation can occur through a change in governance structure or through changes in behavior or perceptions of actors or groups of actors, the two are closely interlinked in the policy process.

A policy process is a realization of SES governance: it reflects interactions between diverse political actors (state and non-state) and institutions, as they define social-ecological problems and adopt solutions (Hill and Varone, 2014). Policy outcomes, such as a rule or institution that regulates social-ecological interactions (Ostrom, 2011), arise from the interplay of multiple individual actions of competing actors (on the micro-level) with macro-level processes such as socio-political or environmental change. Whether a new policy is adapted to a new social-ecological reality or not thus depends on how these complex interactions play out. A better understanding of the mechanisms and conditions that enable (non-state) actors to influence a policy processes towards change or stasis can provide insight on political barriers and opportunities for governance adaptation.

With this paper we unravel one mechanism through which non-state actors can influence policy change with the aim to contribute to disentangling the interactions between political actors and their socio-political environment that may lead to policy adaptation. We focus on interest groups (IG), i.e. organized non-state actors that aim to influence policy outcomes (Hojnacki et al., 2012), because of their increasing involvement and importance for environmental policy making on the global (Arts, 2006; Betsill and Corell, 2001), regional (Hallstrom, 2004; Klüver, 2013; Michaelowa, 1998) and national levels (Cheon and Urpelainen, 2013). IG are both widely present in policy (Falkner, 2000; Rhodes, 2007, 1996) and have the potential to influence policy processes. Moreover, they can engage in promoting as well as blocking policy change (Kingdon, 1990), and support or destroy entrenched policy monopolies (Baumgartner and Jones, 1993; Boushey, 2012). They are tightly connected with parts of the social-ecological system and can thus play important roles in enabling or preventing policy adaptation to social-ecological change. Their influence however is highly conditional on a range of factors, such as IG properties and tactics, institutional conditions or characteristics of the policy issue (Klüver, 2013; Mahoney, 2008, 2007a; Dür and De Bièvre, 2007). Given both their increasing presence and potential to influence environmental policy, it is particularly interesting to examine how IG participation may contribute to policy change or stasis.

We investigate potential causal mechanisms of IG influence on policy by tracing the process of a major policy change that occurred during the 2013 reform of the European Union Common Fisheries Policy (CFP). A causal mechanism is a ‘pathway’ through which a cause brings about an outcome. It consists of entities and their properties that engage in activities that bring about change (Hedström, 2005). The interactions between IG agency and the structures in which they operate in order to influence policy are understood as mechanisms of policy change.

The remainder of the paper is structured as follows: Section 2 describes the case of the EU CFP reform. In Section 3 we describe our theoretical framework and explain how we conceptualize macro-level processes (policy dynamics) and changes on the meso- (coalition dynamics) and micro- levels (IG lobbying tactics) through the combination of the Advocacy Coalition (Sabatier, 1987) and Multiple Streams (Kingdon, 1990) frameworks. Section 4 summarizes the method used in the paper. Section 5 presents the results of the case by looking at preference attainment, IG activities and the conditions under which they took part in the reform process. Finally we discuss our results in Section 6, present the mechanism of IG influence found in this paper and briefly elaborate on the relevance of our results for understanding the capacity of policy to adapt to social-ecological change.

2. Case of the EU common fisheries policy reform

The EU Common Fisheries Policy (CFP) reform process represents a

case of a major policy change characterized by a high presence of IG. Contextually, the reform occurred under changing social and ecological dynamics in European fisheries. A study by the European Commission concluded that 88% of European fish stocks were overfished (European Commission, 2009). At the same time the number of fishermen has increased significantly over the past decades. The growing fleet in combination with technological advances have resulted in an increase in fishing effort that has been deemed unsustainable (Self, 2015). Consequently, the economic viability of many European fisheries is threatened by declining stocks. The state of European Fisheries has been recognized as critical by all policy actors, while the mismanaged stocks were perceived by many as an outcome of a dysfunctional CFP (Österblom et al., 2011; Peñas Lado, 2016; Salomon et al., 2014). Finally, the changes adopted by the CFP reform in 2013 have been recognized as major advancements in responding to the overfishing problem (although the implementation of decisions is still on-going) (Peñas Lado, 2016).

The CFP is a European Union-level framework for regulating the fishing activity of member states in the EU seas as well as abroad. The CFP includes a variety of mechanisms for regulating fleet capacity and composition, access to fish stocks, various technical measures and enforcement of these regulations. The CFP is reformed approximately every 10 years, which means that a window for potential policy changes opens up on a regular basis. During each reform the European Commission initiates the process by setting the agenda in a “green paper” and then releases a draft version of the reform, which is then reviewed, amended and adopted in the Council and Parliament according to the co-decision procedure (see Box 1 for a description of the role of EU institutions in the reform). The inclusion of Parliament as a co-decision maker is a relatively new development, which followed from the ratification of the Lisbon Treaty in 2009. This was a very important institutional change that has been described as re-shaping the dynamics of the CFP reform negotiations (Peñas Lado, 2016).

In previous CFP reforms, IG were active through Regional Advisory Councils (RACs) as well as the EU-level Advisory Committee on Fisheries and Aquaculture (ACFA). Non-formal interactions and lobbying generally took place on the member state level (especially in the case of the fishing industry groups) and to an extent, at the EU level in the Commission. Strengthening of the EU Parliament’s role in the 2013 reform has drawn IG attention to Brussels. As a consequence, reform negotiations saw intense campaigning efforts from environmental IG coalitions as well as to some extent – from fishing industry, processing and consumer organizations (Peñas Lado, 2016). At the same time, the process was characterized by a considerable increase in public attention – with public campaigns against fish discards, consumer concern with the sustainability of fish products and increased transparency of the decision making process (Peñas Lado, 2016).

The key changes to the CFP adopted during the 2013 reform can be summarized in the following way (Peñas Lado, 2016; Self, 2015; EU, 2013):

- Legal obligation for member states to achieve Maximum Sustainable Yield (MSY) levels in all fished stocks at the latest by 2020
- Adoption of long-term management plans as a main management instrument
- Instituting a discard ban to be phased in by 2019
- Changing distribution of quotas to be based on sustainability criteria
- Further steps towards regionalization and decentralization of the policy
- Adoption of European Maritime and Fisheries Fund (EMFF) as funding for CFP and specification on how the funding should be used

3. Theoretical framework

IG influence and contribution to policy change or stability is highly

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