



Public participation, civic capacity, and climate change adaptation in cities



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ABSTRACT

Cities are increasingly involved in planning for climate change adaptation, although the extent and role of public participation in such efforts remains poorly theorized and understudied. This paper employs a case survey methodology to systematically review the recent literature on urban climate change adaptation with respect to public participation, stakeholder engagement, and civic capacity. Six forms of participation in urban adaptation are identified from the literature and the distinguishing characteristics and use of each type are examined across the cases. Few cases illustrate robust and sustained civic capacity in the governance of urban climate adaptation, although several cases reveal budding capacity that could emerge with further efforts to engage businesses and citizens in articulating priorities and strategies for future adaptation efforts.

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1. Introduction

Climate change poses myriad challenges for urban areas, ranging from localized flooding during severe weather events to increased temperatures and worsening air and water quality (Seto and Satterthwaite, 2010). Localities have experimented with approaches to adapt to such challenges and reduce their vulnerabilities to climate hazards (Birkmann et al., 2010; Castan Broto and Bulkeley, 2013). Nevertheless, the ability of localities to implement effective climate change adaptation is uncertain especially in rapidly urbanizing parts of the developing world that also face persistent poverty and underdeveloped infrastructure (Satterthwaite et al., 2007; Tanner et al., 2009). Even wealthy cities in the developed world have been slow to act proactively on climate change adaptation given competing priorities, limited resources, and uncertain effects (Carmin et al., 2012b; National Research Council, 2011). Given the urgency of climate change and the vulnerability of millions of urban residents worldwide, it is critical that we gain a better understanding of the conditions that facilitate the development and implementation of adaptive climate change responses in urban areas (Tanner et al., 2009).

Governance is one factor among many thought to influence the effectiveness of climate adaptation (Mazmanian et al., 2013; Sanchez-Rodriguez et al., 2008; Smith et al., 2009). Governance is the act of solving public problems across multiple sectors, including government, business, and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and interested citizens known collectively as “civil society” (Pierre, 1999). Traditionally, governance was viewed as “what government does” to address societal problems. More recently, the concept of governance expanded beyond government to recognize important or potential contributions made by the private and non-profit sectors to the management of public problems (Bell and Hindmoor, 2009; Elander, 2002; Rosenau, 1995; Stoker, 1998). These multi-sectoral responses to public problems arise, in part, because the nature of public problems and the resources to address them extend beyond clear jurisdictional and sectoral boundaries.

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Indeed, globalization and the restructuring of capital pushed governments toward new governance arrangements with a larger role for non-governmental actors in decision-making and public service provision (Harvey, 1989; Jessop, 1997; Ward, 2000). An extensive literature on these “new public governance” arrangements has emerged (e.g., Heritier and Rhodes, 2011; Pestoff et al., 2013), with conceptual distinctions sometimes drawn between “organizational forms” such as partnerships and traditional “modes of governing” such as networks, markets, or hierarchies (Lowndes and Skelcher, 1998).

Thus, “governance capacity” to address public problems may spread well beyond government into the private and non-profit sectors, and into civil society. Correspondingly, “civic capacity” is defined as “the extent to which different sectors of the community—business, parents, educators, state and local officeholders, nonprofits, and others—act in concert around a matter of community-wide import” (Stone, 2001, p. 595). Originally conceived with respect to urban education, the concept of “civic capacity” has broad application and connects to literatures about social capital and “megacommunities” (Berry et al., 1993; Briggs, 2008; Gerencser et al., 2009; Putnam, 1993). Briggs (2008, p. 13) argues that civic capacity moves beyond the presence of social capital, providing the following two-pronged definition: “the extent to which the sectors that make up a community are (1) *capable* of collective action on public problems (the resource dimension) . . . , and (2) *choose* to apply such capabilities (the dimension of effort, will and choice, or “agency”)” [emphasis in original]. The multi-sectoral aspect of civic capacity resembles Putnam’s “bridging capital” concept (1993) and connects to the literature on “polycentric governance” (Alford, 2013; Ostrom, 2010; Ostrom et al., 1961). Stone (2001) warns that civic capacity remains specific to a particular policy domain and is not necessarily translatable from one topical area (education) into another (environment).

Fig. 1 provides a simple depiction of the overlapping public, private, and non-profit sector spheres of influence that generate three corresponding forms of governance capacity: institutional (public sector) capacity, private capacity, and non-profit (community) capacity. The space in the center of these spheres represents civic capacity. Theoretically, at least, civic capacity need not be led or fostered entirely by the public sector but may emerge from efforts out of the other two sectors, such as in places with a weak or disengaged government. We should not presume that governance capacity is absent when government is absent; both the private and non-profit sectors have vast resources that might be brought to bear to address collective problems such as urban climate adaptation. Nevertheless, some involvement of the public sector in establishing institutions for civic participation and coordination (Baiocchi, 2003) is presumed before civic capacity can fully emerge.

The majority of research on the governance of climate change adaptation has so far focused on building institutional capacity to address climate hazards, with government as the primary actor (Mees and Driessen, 2011; e.g., Heinrichs et al., 2013). This literature often provides a rationale for government action and a slate of policy and planning actions that could be undertaken to address climate change across multiple sectors (i.e., transport, energy, and land use). A frequently unstated presumption is that limited capacity is the primary barrier to effective response. Yet, capacity by itself does not assure “appropriate adaptation” to climate change (Satterthwaite, 2007, p. 10). Hammer et al. (2011, p. 87) argue: “[a]n appropriate response to climate change needs to transcend a government-policy based approach to embrace governance mechanisms that harness the creativity and advice of civil society, from business and academia to community leaders.”

To what extent, then, does urban climate governance embrace mechanisms that engage the public? Some form of public participation is expected at the national and international levels under the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), the foremost international coordinating body for climate change response (Few et al., 2007). As one response, nations have allowed non-governmental representatives on climate delegations in order to improve the legitimacy of the process despite not having any formal legal authority to make decisions (Andonova et al., 2009; Böhmelt et al., 2014). In addition, public participation forms a critical component of the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) guidelines for Climate Change “Adaptation Policy Frameworks” (Lim and Spanger-Siegfried, 2004) and the National Adaptation Programmes of Action (NAPA) required by least-developed nations under the UNFCCC. Public participation is also a core element of the “Convention on Access to Information, Public Participation in Decision-Making and Access to Justice in Environmental Matters” of the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe, signed by European member nations in Aarhus, Denmark in 1998.

At the local level, and particularly for cities, participation is theoretically a part of “good urban governance for climate change adaptation,” characterized by “(1) decentralisation and autonomy, (2) accountability and transparency, (3) responsiveness and flexibility, (4) participation and inclusion and (5) experience and support” (Tanner et al., 2009, p. 9). In principle, participation may be more easily obtained at local levels than at higher levels given the fewer people that may need to coordinate for collective action (Corfee-Morlot et al., 2009; Olson, 1971). In principle, participation will result in more effective adaptation plans (Holstein, 2010). Additionally, “[b]y involving local stakeholders and experts in the development of a national adaptation strategy the gap between the top-down and bottom-up approaches to adaptation can be bridged” (de Bruin et al., 2009, p. 25).

While generally desired, not all forms of participation in climate governance are equal. Questions have been raised over the substance of participation and the practicalities of managing it (Few et al., 2007; Tompkins et al., 2008). Likewise, concerns have been raised over the representativeness of the participants involved and the possible cooptation and manipulation of the governance process by special interests (Ayers, 2011; Cooke and Kothari, 2001; Few et al., 2007; Stringer et al., 2006). For instance, governance processes that involve well-resourced and well-connected private sector participants such as heads of local businesses may bring important knowledge and skills to the table, building governance capacity, but also serve to perpetuate existing power structures favoring business over private citizens or the few over the many (Few et al., 2007; Lampis and Fraser, 2012; Raco, 2000). Additionally, “[p]articipatory spaces are not neutral: they are created spaces, that provide opportunities for agency and inclusion but also exclusion” (Ayers, 2011, p. 66). Importantly, the presence of

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