



Measuring policy analytical capacity for the environment: A case for engaging new actors

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Abstract

This paper discusses how varied policy analytical capacity can be evaluated at the systemic level through observed gaps in environmental data monitoring and reporting among countries. Such analytical capacity at the knowledge system level facilitates transparency and credibility needed for nation-states to cooperate on issues requiring global coordination, including “super-wicked” environmental issues like climate change. So far there has been relatively sparse attention paid to whether countries will have the ability – or policy analytical capacity – to report the necessary data and indicators required for the next round of global Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) being proposed. In this paper, I argue that the varied policy analytical capacity within the global environmental knowledge system necessitates the participation of new institutions and actors. Identifying gaps in data availability at a global, systemic scale, this paper presents a proxy measure of policy analytical capacity based on publicly-reported national statistics of air and water quality performance. Such discrepancies evaluated at a systemic level make a case for channels by which citizen scientists, independent watchdogs, private sector companies and third-party organizations can participate to enhance the policy analytical capacity of governments.

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1. Introduction

Policy analytical capacity is critical to advance evidence-based approaches to environmental decision-making and governance. It is defined as the ability of governments to analyze information, apply research methods and advanced modeling techniques, and is considered as one of the core competencies required for “governance success” (Howlett, 2009; Wu, Ramesh, & Howlett, 2014). Such analytical ability is required to build trust between individual actors and organizations, who evaluate the credibility of policy interventions based on their performance, which is often substantiated in terms of data and statistical results (Blind, 2007). On a larger systemic level, the use of data and evidence facilitates transparency and credibility needed for nation-states to cooperate on issues requiring global coordination.

The consideration of policy analytical capacity is particularly salient in the context of environmental issues, where “super-wicked” problems of the commons like climate change (Levin, Cashore, Bernstein, & Auld, 2007) necessitate global environmental governance. Effective commons governance for global-scale problems is dependent upon

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“good, trustworthy information about the stocks, flows, and processes within the resource systems being governed” (Dietz, Ostrom, & Stern, 2003). However, data gaps, information asymmetries and uncertainty – arguably the result of low and varied policy analytical capacity among governments – have long plagued sound management and policy practices (Esty, 2001). When aggregated to the global systemic scale, these knowledge disparities result in the inability to effectively track performance and progress toward universal goals, such as the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) to be decided in September 2015. So far there has been relatively sparse attention paid to whether countries will have the ability – or policy analytical capacity – to monitor, collect and report the necessary data and indicators required for the range of targets proposed.

In this paper, I argue that the varied policy analytical capacity within the global environmental knowledge system necessitates the participation of new institutions and actors. Identifying gaps in data availability at a global, systemic scale, this paper presents a proxy measure of policy analytical capacity based on publicly reported national statistics of air and water quality performance. While by no means an attempt to explain causal factors for the lack of data and a crude approximation at best, the method proposed here is a first step toward highlighting potential disparities in policy analytical capacity that could threaten global environmental management, as well as policymakers’ ability to establish appropriate benchmarks for the future SDGs. Such discrepancies evaluated at a systemic level make a case for channels by which citizen scientists, independent watchdogs, private sector companies and third-party organizations can participate to enhance the policy analytical capacity of governments.

2. Evidenced-based approaches and policy analytical capacity

The relationship between knowledge and policymaking is central – if not the central relationship – for public policy studies (Parsons, 2004). With respect to the environment, scholars point to the lack of knowledge, resources, and weakness of institutions that limit management (Jänicke, 1997). Historically, environmental law and policy have not emphasized information and its disclosure as a primary concern, resulting in uncertainty being the “hallmark of the environmental domain” (Esty, 2004). Technical and analytical limitations, inadequate and incomplete monitoring systems that prevent accurate assessment, market failures, and institutional deficiencies result in information gaps (Esty, 2004; Metzenbaum, 1998). The recognition that these knowledge deficiencies are at the root of policy failure has motivated a shift toward investigating the role of information, its disclosure and transparency, in environmental decision-making (Esty, 2004; Mol, 2006).

International practice has demonstrated that increased information facilitates pollution reduction by allowing for identification of target areas and allocation of resources where most needed. A growing number of environmental regulators have sought to accompany enforcement systems with information programs to reveal environmental performance of polluters (Wang et al., 2004; Foulon et al., 2002). However, the rise of information and data-based approaches has been “piecemeal and inchoate” (Kleindorfer & Orts, 1999). Only within the last two decades have information and knowledge, in addition to its networks and infrastructures, been increasingly seen as critical components for understanding social processes in the Information Age (Castells, 1996, 1997a, 1997b; Mol, 2006). Scholars (Florini, 2007; Gupta, Christopher, Wang, Gehrig, & Kumar, 2006; Mol, 2006, 2009; Tietenberg, 1998; Van Kersbergen & Van Warden, 2004) note an increasing emphasis on information and its disclosure as an effective policy mechanism to drive improvements in environmental performance, or what Case (2001) refers to as “informational regulation.”

Proponents of such evidenced-based approaches, however, tend to overlook the role of capacity in adopting these methods, which at their core emphasize policy failure as a result of information gaps but do not necessarily acknowledge the ability of actors or systems to effectively utilize information in decision-making. The growing emphasis on evidence-based policymaking can stretch the analytical resources of organizations to a “breaking point” (Howlett, 2009; Hammersley, 2005). Such analytical resources and the ability to acquire and utilize knowledge in policy processes is what Howlett (2009) refers to as “policy analytical capacity,” which is defined as:

“the amount of basic research a government can conduct or access, its ability to apply statistical methods, applied research methods, and advanced modeling techniques to this data and employ analytical techniques to this data and employ analytical techniques such as environmental scanning, trends analysis, and forecasting methods in order to gauge broad public opinion and attitudes, as well as those of interest groups and other major policy players, and to anticipate future policy impacts. It also involves the ability to communicate policy related messages to interested parties and stakeholders.”

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