



Beyond localism: The micropolitics of local legitimacy in a community-based organization



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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 1 September 2016

Received in revised form

16 December 2016

Accepted 4 January 2017

ABSTRACT

Abstract Place-based non-governmental organizations have assumed expanded roles in the processes of community development and environmental governance. However, to date there has been insufficient attention paid to the processes by which these organizations establish the necessary legitimacy among local populations and community leaders to be able to act and speak on behalf of the community. This paper draws on a case study of the community forestry efforts of one community-based organization in the rural US West to analyze how the organization developed and maintained local legitimacy. Our analysis of the micropolitics of community-based social and environmental governance highlights three interrelated resources that contributed to local legitimacy: interpersonal relationships, shared development narratives, and achievement of demonstrable practical outcomes. At the same time, we find important constraints to achieving outcomes, and therefore to increasing local legitimacy, that are reflective of larger structural constraints in the context of neoliberal governance. We argue for greater consideration of the quotidian and embodied interactions of individuals working in particular places—as influenced by their larger structural contexts—to understand the dynamics of small place-based organizations.

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1. Introduction

The scope of action of local and regional non-governmental organizations (NGOs) has increased with the shift from hierarchical (state-led) government to multiactor networked governance in many countries (Edwards and Hulme, 1995; Falkner, 2003; Newell et al., 2012). Neoliberal processes of “rolling back” the state and “rolling out” a variety of hybrid governance mechanisms (Peck and Tickell, 2002) have opened opportunities for NGOs to take on expanded roles in community development, planning, natural resource conservation, and related tasks traditionally performed by governments (Buscher, 2010; Fredericksen and London, 2000; Hodge and Adams, 2012; Marwell, 2004; Parkins et al., 2016). The ascension of NGOs as leaders of conservation and development

processes has sparked a critical debate regarding questions of the legitimacy and accountability of non-state actors (Brosius et al., 1998; Connelly et al., 2006; Edwards and Hulme, 1995; Lane and Morrison, 2006). These questions have become particularly salient given the “blurring” of state and non-state roles in devolved governance (Newell et al., 2012).

Shifts in environmental governance have revitalized the focus on communities in geography and allied disciplines. This has brought attention to the emerging networks of discourse and action that are spatially rooted at the community scale and take as their charge the governance of the local social and natural environment (e.g., Cheng et al., 2015; Healey et al., 2003; Larner and Craig, 2005; Lockie and Higgins, 2007; Uphoff, 1993). In the U.S. West, this is seen most prominently in literature on place-based collaboration and community forestry, which are framed as participatory and grassroots alternatives to the technocratic and top-down planning institutions that have dominated environmental management and rural development (Baker and Kusel, 2003; Brick et al., 2000; Gray et al., 2001; Kusel and Adler, 2003; McCarthy, 2005, 2006). While the bulk of this scholarship has focused on the procedural aspects of inclusive multi-stakeholder

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collaboration (e.g., Conley and Moote, 2003; Daniels and Walker, 1996; Margerum, 2011; Wondolleck, 2000; Yaffee, 1994), processes of network governance in rural places also include the development of a substantial community-based NGO sector that is worthy of closer analysis. Indeed, a network of community-based organizations (CBOs) is arguably responsible for catalyzing substantial institutional change in furtherance of a community forestry model in a number of communities across the West (Abrams et al., 2015; Danks, 2008; Enzer and Goebel, 2014).

As locally rooted “bridging organizations” (Berkes, 2009; Brown, 1991; Cash et al., 2003; Crona and Parker, 2012; Hahn et al., 2006), CBOs may be capable of catalyzing improvements in rural development and conservation while avoiding some of the pitfalls of centralized and top-down managerial forms (Westley, 1995). A key component of this kind of work is legitimacy, “a sense that an organization is lawful, proper, admissible and justified in doing what it does and saying what it says, and that it continues to enjoy the support of an identifiable constituency” (Edwards, 1999, p. 258). In many cases, NGOs derive their legitimacy specifically from their ability to act effectively where states have failed to do so (Collingwood, 2006). Moreover, NGOs derive significant benefit from the “discursive legitimacy” (Hardy and Phillips, 1998; Purdy, 2012) bestowed upon them due to their ability to represent social groups or interests deemed important in popular discourse. Yet relatively little scholarship specifically queries how community-based NGOs establish and maintain legitimacy among community members and organizational leaders in the regions they serve. This “local legitimacy” is a potentially complex concept in communities of the rural U.S. West, which have undergone substantial economic restructuring (Nelson, 2001) and demographic turnover (Winkler et al., 2007) and which remain riven by competing narratives of past and future development (McCarthy, 2002; Walker, 2003). Questions of legitimacy may also be bound up in negotiating diverse cultural and material differences between the ‘rural’ and ‘urban’ that in turn shape economic activity, the landscape, and lived experiences (Hiner, 2016). Here we investigate the micro-politics of local legitimacy among the Glenwood, Washington-based CBO Mount Adams Resource Stewards (MARS) and the former timber-dependent community in which it works through the CBO’s relationships with residents and with other organizations relevant to the social, political, and economic life of people in the region. We argue that dimensions of interpersonal relations, local narratives, and demonstrations of effectiveness were crucial to both the organization’s local legitimacy and, ultimately, its license to lead community development efforts. At the same time, larger structural constraints continued to weigh on the ability of these efforts to achieve a lasting transformation in the community’s developmental trajectory.

2. The rise of community-based organizations in rural development and natural resource management

As rural bridging organizations, CBOs have been key but, to date, understudied actors in community-based conservation and development in the U.S. West (Danks, 2008). We define CBOs here as grassroots NGOs that work at multiple scales to achieve natural resource-based rural development in historically resource-dependent communities (Abrams et al., 2015). These organizations emerged in specific geographies across the West to help navigate the transition to what has been called a “new natural resource economy” (Hibbard and Lurie, 2013) based on sustainable environmental management practices and associated economic development. The emergence of CBOs in the rural U.S. West parallels a global trend in the rise of non-profit and non-governmental organizations, which regularly work in historically marginalized

areas to fill gaps in public services (Corson, 2010; Marwell, 2004; Takahashi and Smutny, 2001). In the United States and Canada, government promotion of community forestry reflects a trend in the devolution of state-centered control over natural resources to facilitate local participation in conservation and rural development (Glasmeier and Farrigan, 2005; McCarthy, 2005, 2006; Parkins et al., 2016).

Numerous structural issues associated with the persistence of governmental and corporate domination of resources challenge efforts to facilitate just and effective community-based natural resource based development in many rural areas (Alexander, 1999; Fernandez-Gimenez et al., 2008; Parkins et al., 2016; Takahashi and Smutny, 2001). Prior research has examined how community-based resource management projects, particularly those run by external actors, can risk further marginalizing rural populations by exacerbating inequalities or entrenching poverty, often citing ‘elite capture’ as an issue (Berkes, 2004; Blaikie, 2006; Glasmeier and Farrigan, 2005; Mansuri and Vijayendra, 2004; Marfo, 2007). More generally, challenges such as poor external support, increasing commodification and privatization, a lack of true devolution, weak local institutions, and a lack of capacities or resources in communities limit the potential of community-based efforts (Armitage, 2005; Blaikie, 2006; Gruber, 2010; Leach et al., 1999). Moreover, after decades of rural resource extraction and marginalization, recent policy reforms promising community participation often meet rural populations “weary and wary of any further interventions by the government” (Blaikie, 2006, p. 1943).

Despite these tensions and constraints, locally based NGOs have shown some success in resolving longstanding resource conflicts, representing diverse community interests to higher-scale decision-makers, empowering traditionally disempowered actors, and facilitating the delivery of local economic and environmental benefits (Arcand and Wagner, 2016; Barr et al., 2015). For example, to enhance the wellbeing and security of the interests they serve, CBOs may fill institutional gaps at the local level and create linkages across multiple scales and sectors to generate opportunities for local resource users (Abrams et al., 2015). Here, CBOs look inward to attend to the diverse needs of their rural communities and simultaneously reach outward to navigate the various—and often conflicting—interests of government agencies, corporations, and other non-governmental groups that commonly have vested interests in public lands and resources (McDermott et al., 2011; Cheng et al., 2015). In contrast to the rigid bureaucratic arrangements of large-scale governmental and non-governmental organizations, CBOs may have the potential to act in a more flexible and adaptable manner (Brown, 1991; Crona and Parker, 2012; Westley, 1995). However, as organizations rooted at the community scale, their ability to act is contingent upon the establishment of strong local legitimacy (Hashemi and Hasan, 1999; Pratten and Ali Baldo, 1995; Walker and McCarthy, 2010).

3. Local legitimacy as a key concern for CBOs and place-based NGOs

Legitimacy is a multifaceted concept defined here following Suchman (1995, p. 574) as “a generalized perception or assumption that the actions of an entity are desirable, proper, or appropriate within some socially constructed system of norms, values, beliefs, and definitions.” The literature on NGO legitimacy encompasses a wide span of definitional criteria, ranging from apolitical measures of market efficiency to more explicitly political measures of structural change (Atack, 1999; Thrandardottir, 2015; Vedder, 2007). In spite of the expansive literature on NGO legitimacy, Lister (2003) observes that analyses often fail to specify to whom an organization must establish its legitimacy; existing scholarship typically

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