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Analysis

Stuck in the middle with you: The role of bridging organisations in urban regeneration

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ABSTRACT

The literature on the governance of social-ecological systems increasingly recognizes a key role of bridging organisations (BOs) in transition processes towards sustainability. BOs can be defined as facilitators who allow for interorganisational collaboration. Our paper provides a more nuanced understanding of specific BO activities and their contributions towards urban sustainability. Our analysis is based on applying three complementary methodological angles (drawing on geolocalised data, interviews and action research) to 20 years of urban renovation investments in the city-region of Brussels. We distinguish between multi-scale, multi-actor and multi-dimensional tensions in urban renovation programmes and link these tensions to bridging challenges for BOs. Results suggest that the corresponding three types of bridging roles form a trilemma rather than a trilogy: the BOs in study have mediated one tension by de facto exacerbating another. Lessons from action research suggest that a wider use of temporality and shared language to communicate about urban renovation projects could attenuate the bridging trilemma.

1. Introduction

Numerous city-regions are affected by strong global pressures such as climate change, resource depletion and energy security that can be seen as "new challenges and pressures on urban growth and to the management of cities' critical infrastructures" (Hodson and Marvin, 2010; p. 477). In their review of 30 years of urban regeneration projects in Britain, Germany and France, Couch et al. (2011) have identified deindustrialisation, the globalisation of production chains, demographic change, obsolete urban structures, degraded environments and low-quality housing as common pressures in many city-regions.[1] One way cities can respond to these macro challenges is through 'urban regeneration' (also referred to as 'urban renovation', 'urban revitalisation', 'urban renewal' etc.), i.e. proactive interventions aimed at overhauling parts of urban systems.

The need for cities to adapt to these macro pressures has spurred considerable interest of both decision makers and academics for urban regeneration policies (Hill et al., 2012; Cowell, 2013; Nolan and Wong, 2004; Glaeser and Gottlieb, 2008; Busso et al., 2013). Examples of these policies include the "City Deals" in the UK, the "Empowerment Zone Program" in the US, the "Zones Franches Urbaines" in France or the "Neighbourhood Contracts" in Belgium. Also many investments in so-called "Urban areas in difficulty" under Objective 2 of European Union development funds, for instance in former industrial cities in Eastern Germany and Northern France, are essentially urban regeneration policies.

The overall research objective of this article is to investigate whether the importance of bridging roles that has been identified in the wider sustainability literature – especially in social-ecological system theory and transition theory – also applies to the specific case of the implementation of urban regeneration programmes. While different strands of the literature in ecological economics and related fields underline that bridging organisations can be instrumental for transitions towards sustainability, our paper fills an important gap by being the first to examine empirically the incidence and success of bridging activities in the context of urban regeneration. We argue that this is a highly relevant contribution to the sustainability literature: despite the fact that BOs "appear to be essential for building the capacity to adapt to change" (Folke et al., 2005), the incidence and success of bridging roles in urban regeneration programmes, arguably one of the most purposive policies driving urban change, have so far not been studied in the literature.

The article is structured as follows. Section 2 defines bridging organisations and discusses different conceptualisations of bridging roles in two strands of the sustainability literature. Section 3 presents our research approach based on three complementary empirical angles, specifying for each angle the related research questions, empirical data and methods. Section 4 describes our empirical results for the case of the

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[1] We use the terms 'urban agglomerations' and 'city-regions' interchangeably. Following Le Corbusier, an agglomeration can be defined by its limits: the area of influence of another agglomeration (Le Corbusier, 1957).

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main urban regeneration policy in Brussels, Belgium's largest city-region with a surface of 161 km^2 and 1.2 million inhabitants. Through this policy, called "Neighbourhood Contracts" (NCs), 1.14 billion euros have been invested over the last twenty years. The NC programme brings together local, regional and federal actors and allows studying bridging roles across scales, actors and dimensions of urban regeneration over a long period. Section 5 discusses our empirical findings in light of the extant literature and the final section concludes.

2. Bridging Organisations and Urban Regeneration

2.1. Definition of Bridging Organisations

When scholars refer to 'bridging', they use the term as metaphorical reference to an actual bridge, i.e. a physical object that provides a causeway over a ravine, a canyon or a river (Sapsed et al., 2007). The metaphor of a bridge evokes at least three elements: an obstacle or gap that renders communication or exchange difficult or even impossible; two or more sides that are separated by this obstacle; and a deliberate intervention designed to overcome the separation between the different sides. The bridge metaphor is a very common figure of speech and is employed extensively in the literature on sustainable development (e.g. Gunderson et al., 1995; Candemir and Van Lente, 2007).

A more specific meaning of the metaphor associates it to a special type of organisation – 'bridging organisations' or BOs – whose objectives are, perhaps not exclusively but to a significant degree, directed at overcoming barriers to cooperation on more sustainable approaches to environmental problems. For Brown (1991), these barriers include horizontal communication difficulties between local communities engaged in environmental resource management, but also vertical barriers between local communities and higher scales of governance, such as regional, national or international governments. Westley's (1995) use of the term emphasizes a specific outcome by defining bridging organisations as 'interorganisational collaboration'; this term includes collaboration between "different and similar actors and stakeholders across and within organisational hierarchies and types" (Westley, 1995).

In the sustainability literature, the thus defined term has been applied to a large variety of organisations. The latter may differ with respect to the organizational form of the BO and includes associations, networks, cross-sectoral partnerships, political coalitions or social movements (Brown, 1991). Moreover, the initiative to a bridging organization may be bottom-up or top–down (Hahn et al., 2006). As an example for one of the many different actors labelled as BOs we cite the Ecomuseum Kristianstad Vattenrike, which is discussed by Hahn et al. (2006). In this case, the BO emerged with the purpose of overcoming scattered knowledge and policy responses to a perceived crisis in wetland landscape management in southern Sweden.

Because the bridging metaphor encompasses so many types of organisations engaged in different forms of 'barrier removal', the meaning of BOs partially overlaps with other concepts such as 'boundary organizations' (Cash and Moser, 2000) or 'intermediaries' (Kivimaa, 2014). According to Folke et al. (2005), the definition of BOs is wider and encompasses all the functions of a boundary organisation. We argue that BOs can also provide some functions of intermediaries, which is why we hypothesize that some of the roles associated with intermediaries in sustainability transitions can also apply to BOs in urban regeneration programmes (see Section 2.2.3).

2.2. Overview of Bridging Roles in the Sustainability Literature

This section reviews two strands of the literature on sustainability – namely 'social-ecological systems theory' (Section 2.2.1) and 'transition theory' (Section 2.2.2) – in order to identify the different roles pertaining to BOs. We then discuss how some of these roles could also apply to BOs operating in the context of urban regeneration programmes (Section 2.2.3).

2.2.1. Bridging in Social-ecological Systems

According to Plummer and Armitage (2007), the development of social-ecological system (SES) theory reflects interdisciplinary efforts to combine insights from natural and social sciences in order to improve our understanding of complex systems involving both anthropogenic and 'natural' elements (Berkes and Folke, 1998). An extended definition has been provided by Weisz et al. (2001), who see SES as "comprising a 'natural' or 'biophysical' sphere of causation governed by natural laws, and a 'cultural' or 'symbolic' sphere of causation reproduced by symbolic communication". In this conceptualisation of SES, the overlap between the 'natural' and 'cultural' spheres constitutes the "biophysical structures of society" (Haberl et al., 2004).

The complex interactions between society and biophysical materialities within SES provide the scope and necessity for BOs (Hahn et al., 2006). On a very general level, the latter can help to connect the natural and cultural spheres of causation (Fischer-Kowalski and Haberl, 2007). On a more specific level, the environmental resources that are extracted from natural ecosystems and integrated in the biophysical structures of society can be managed through very different societal arrangements that vary with respect to their sustainability and their resilience. A range of studies has pointed out that these environmental resource management arrangements lead to more sustainable and resilient outcomes if they are able to integrate knowledge from multiple strata of governance and from multiple sectors of society, for instance in the form of co-management arrangements, implying in turn the need for bridges across strata and sectors (Hahn et al., 2006; Ostrom, 2015). It is for this reason that "the role of bridging organisations has been extensively studied in the literature in environmental governance in the specific context of formal co-management arrangements" (Dedeurwaerdere et al., 2015; p. 27). These studies have provided ample evidence that BOs often have the capacity to create horizontal linkages and information flows across sectors and scales (Brown, 1991; Vignola et al., 2013).

In addition to the wider idea of bridging between 'natural' and 'cultural' spheres of causation, BOs have been associated with a series of more specific roles. Brown (1991) has argued that BOs help local stakeholders to articulate visions and expectations about environmental resources and their management, and afterwards to translate visions and expectations into material actions. Hahn et al. (2006) describe the role of BOs as "providing an arena for trust-building, vertical and horizontal collaboration, learning, sense-making, identification of common interests, and conflict resolution" (p. 586). Similarly, Folke et al. (2005) say that the role of BOs can be to lower the costs of collaboration and conflict resolution. Berkes (2009) finds that BOs provide "a forum for the interaction of different kinds of knowledge, and the coordination of other tasks that enable co-operation: accessing resources, bringing together different actors, building trust, resolving conflict, and networking." Focusing on the aspect of knowledge creation, Dedeurwaerdere et al. (2015) state that BOs "organise knowledge co-production and social learning amongst the various actors and types of knowledge" (p.27).

2.2.2. Bridging in Transition Theory

Transition theory is a rapidly expanding body of research on how societies move between successive socio-technical configurations. Such transitions are 'socio-technical' because they are defined as encompassing social (e.g. in organisations or governance structures) as well as technical transitions (e.g. in infrastructures or biophysical systems). A central tool for transition theory has been the 'multi-level perspective on socio-technical transitions' (Geels, 2005) that comprises three interrelated levels: the landscape (macro) level represents broader conditions, opportunities or pressures for transitions; the regime (*meso*) level refers to the sum of institutions, regulations, policies and other manifestations of the dominant socio-technical configurations; the niche (micro) is a place that is relatively protected from the pressures of the dominant regime and which therefore provides a space for experimentation and innovation with new or alternative socio-technical configurations (Kemp et al., 2007).