



## Analysis

# Pluralising climate change solutions? Views held and voiced by participants at the international climate change negotiations



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## ARTICLE INFO

## Article history:

Received 30 May 2013

Received in revised form 18 January 2014

Accepted 4 June 2014

Available online 27 June 2014

## Keywords:

Non-state actors

Climate change

Global environmental governance

Deliberative democracy

Discursive hegemony

## ABSTRACT

Intergovernmental organisations have developed into important sites of normative contestation where increasingly non-state actors participate. A common puzzle is however whether engaged non-state actors represent already strong and established interests or if they also bring forth marginalised voices. This concern raises the pertinent question of what views non-state actors actually represent and if this adds to the perspectives voiced by state actors. This paper examines the views held and voiced by state and a range of non-state participants at the United Nation's climate change conferences. Specifically, questions on what types of climate change solutions are favoured and to what extent these solutions are discussed are addressed. Through statistical analyses of questionnaire data and a content analysis of abstracts of side-events to the conferences, we find that while non-state actors help in broadening the discursive space, some perspectives remain marginalised. We conclude that while non-state actors represent a pluralising force, greater non-state actor participation in intergovernmental organisations is on its own unlikely to lead to democratic global governance.

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## 1. Introduction

Climate change is an area that is fraught with normative contestation on the appropriate modes of solutions. One fault line has been between proponents of market solutions and those favouring government regulations. Other discussions include the role of technological innovations, lifestyle changes and new economic models (Dryzek and Stevenson, 2011). A major challenge for climate change governance is therefore how to integrate diverse interests and perspectives in a legitimate and accountable manner in global norm-setting (Biermann and Gupta, 2011; Spagnuolo, 2011; Steffek and Hahn, 2010). As the intergovernmental negotiations on climate change have stalled in recent years, there has been a growing realisation that a range of solutions and the involvement of multiple actors are necessary to tackle climate change (e.g. Blok et al., 2012). In this context, the involvement of non-state actors in offering and implementing solutions has been recognised (Nasiritousi et al., 2014).

Non-state actors<sup>1</sup> are a diverse set of actors that are transforming the international system by participating in governance functions at

different levels. Despite often lacking an official role in the international political system, non-state actors can through processes of cooperation and contestation shape how issues are framed and acted upon (Nye, 1990; Sikkink, 2002). In particular, the participation of non-state actors in multilateral cooperation has been suggested as a way of reducing the democratic deficit that international rule-making is perceived to suffer from (Biermann and Gupta, 2011). Some scholars even view their participation as a basis for global deliberative democracy as they can contribute to voicing plural discourses and offer alternative perspectives to states (Dryzek and Stevenson, 2011; Nanz and Steffek, 2005; Sikkink, 2002).

However, concerns have been raised that non-state actors participating in global politics act as elitist interest groups that lobby at the international level (Holmes, 2011; Swyngedouw, 2005). A related concern is whether the active non-state actors represent already strong and established interests or if they also bring forth marginalised voices, i.e. whether they reinforce mainstream views or contribute with progressive ideas (Hjerpe and Buhr, 2014; Dryzek and Stevenson, 2011; Nordang Uhre, 2013). The pertinent question of what views non-state actors represent has important implications for the thesis that non-state actors in fact contribute to democratising global governance, and thus requires empirical investigation.

To examine whether non-state actors represent and voice plural perspectives in international affairs, we focus on the multilateral climate change negotiations under the auspices of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC). The UNFCCC

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<sup>1</sup> Here we use the term non-state actor to mean any group that is not a sovereign state participating in global governance, while excluding armed groups.

constitutes an important meeting point of non-state actors from different geographical locations interested in a wide range of issues related to climate change (Hjerpe and Linnér, 2010; Depledge, 2005; Nasiritousi and Linnér, 2014; Schroeder and Lovell, 2012). This makes it a rewarding empirical setting for exploring the democratic potential of non-state actors, e.g. environmental NGOs, business groups, research organisations, intergovernmental organisations, and indigenous peoples organisations. With non-state actors at times outnumbering state party participants, scholars have sought to understand their roles in the climate change conferences (Betsill, 2008; Lovell, 2007; Nasiritousi and Linnér, 2014; Newell, 2000). As some aim to influence the negotiations, it is of interest to understand what opinions they represent. Nevertheless, few have sought to systematically analyse what views non-state actors hold and voice. While official participant lists reveal that they come from diverse geographical and epistemic origins, participants' views with respect to general discourses and preferred solutions to the climate change problem have not received adequate scholarly attention. We suggest that an empirical investigation of participants' views furthers our understanding of the extent to which non-state actors contribute to pluralising global governance by offering alternative perspectives to states.

This paper aims to empirically explore views held and voiced by state and a range of non-state actors on how climate change should be addressed at two recent Conference of Parties (COP) to the UNFCCC. After reviewing the literature on the democratic potential of non-state actors in global governance, we analyse results from a questionnaire handed out to participants at COP-17 in Durban (2011) and COP-18 in Doha (2012). We also perform a content analysis of abstracts of side-events arranged at the COPs in 2009–2012. The paper thereby empirically assesses differences of opinion between states and groups of non-state actors on effective climate change solutions, and examines to what extent these solutions are voiced by conference participants hosting side-events.

## 2. Democratic Implications of Non-State Actor Participation

Globalisation processes have given rise to several governance challenges for states, not least the need to coordinate actions that have significant impacts beyond sovereign jurisdictions (Cerny, 2010). One way in which states have sought to tackle global problems, such as climate change, is to delegate responsibility to intergovernmental organisations (IGOs). These have, however, been criticised on the grounds of deficient accountability and democratic legitimacy (Haas, 2004). While more states are democratising, the growing importance of IGOs for international rule-making means that many decisions are taken with a weak chain of electoral accountability. Thus the traditional liberal models of democracy may not provide adequate democratic appeal in an age of globalisation (Scholte, 2002).

The increasing participation of non-state actors in the work of IGOs, it has been argued, could provide a remedy to the democratic deficit (Dingwerth, 2007; Scholte, 2004; Steffek and Nanz, 2008; Tallberg and Uhlin, 2011). This argument does not remain uncontested, however. Critics argue that non-state actors may subvert existing democratic processes and may themselves be undemocratic (Anderson and Rieff 2005; Brühl, 2010; Steffek and Hahn, 2010). Nevertheless, amongst scholars who believe that global democracy is possible, two ideal-types to democratic governance perceive a role for non-state actors in contributing to democratising global governance: global stakeholder democracy and transnational deliberative democracy (Bäckstrand, 2011). While agreeing on the importance of accountability, participation, and transparency, they differ in their descriptions of how global democracy can be achieved. Global stakeholder democracy focuses on institutionalising the participation of relevant stakeholders in decision-making (Macdonald, 2008). Transnational deliberative democracy, on the other hand, stresses the importance of public spheres of deliberation that allow multiple perspectives to be considered before decisions are

made (Dryzek, 2009; Dryzek and Stevenson, 2011; Nanz and Steffek, 2005; Smith and Brassett, 2008).

In other words, while global stakeholder democracy emphasises the importance of including relevant stakeholders in order to give voice to those affected by decisions, the transnational deliberative democracy models that promote discursive democracy instead speak of open and inclusive discursive space (Stevenson and Dryzek, 2012). One reason for why the emphasis is not placed on the inclusion of stakeholders in the latter view is because many global issues affect a vast number of stakeholders, since global decisions can have significant impacts on people's lives. Climate change is an illuminating example of an issue where almost anyone could be considered a stakeholder. Discursive democracy therefore suggests that the physical presence of all stakeholders is not key, but instead requires the inclusion of a plurality of perspectives so that many views can be considered (Dryzek and Stevenson, 2011).

This conception of discursive democracy is not unproblematic however. While it has been argued that plural perspectives should be represented and channelled into decision-making for enhancing democratic legitimacy (Dryzek and Stevenson, 2011), the relative weight given to the perspectives may vary. Questions have been raised regarding whether mainstream perspectives should be given equal weight as marginalised perspectives, or whether relative weights should be given to perspectives that reflect their underlying support amongst the public (ibid). A related question is whether it is possible to decouple the agents participating in global forums from the perspectives voiced. According to Holmes (2011: 3), "Struggles in environmental politics are battles to assert discursive hegemony: to ensure that one's own storyline is taken to be the authoritative, accepted version, forming the basis for policy." This implies that particular discourses or perspectives may be tied to particular actors.

A pertinent question in establishing the democratic effects of greater non-state actor participation is thus whether these actors are best described through a De Tocquevillian or a Gramscian approach. The former views civil society actors as a democratising force assuming them to facilitate discourse and interest articulation and thereby improve representation. The latter views civil society actors as reproducing existing patterns of power and political contestation, thereby simply adding to struggles that already occur in the political sphere (Clarke, 1998). The proliferation of non-state actors has often been described according to the De Tocquevillian perspective. However, several studies have questioned the rosy picture of non-state actors and call for more empirical research into their nature and activities (Bexell et al., 2010; Steffek and Hahn, 2010). Issues that have not received adequate scrutiny are whether non-state actors contribute to pluralising views and the relative weight of the perspectives that they voice, which we explore below in the context of climate change.

## 3. Non-State Actor Participation in the UNFCCC

The international climate change negotiations under the UNFCCC have in recent years turned into 'mega-conferences' that annually attract thousands of participants. Because these negotiations draw the largest non-state actor interest amongst all international environmental agreements and because such a broad range of issues are discussed, it represents a good case for studying non-state actor views. The relative openness of the climate change regime to non-state actor participation (Nasiritousi and Linnér, 2014) provides space to non-state actors to play a number of roles, such as information-sharing, capacity building and implementation, and rule-setting (Andonova et al., 2009; Nasiritousi et al., 2014). Therefore, if non-state actors contribute to democratising global governance, the international climate change conferences would be the place to study its effects.

According to Dryzek and Stevenson (2011), the international climate change conferences contribute to a model for global democracy. Their study of deliberative practices at the UNFCCC concludes that

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