



Municipal managers' engagement in multi-level governance arrangements: An empirical analysis grounded in relational economic geography



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ABSTRACT

Diverse empirical evidence regarding Local Agenda 21 (LA21) seems to indicate that, in territories where multi-level governance arrangements (networks) have emerged, LA21 dissemination tends to be higher. However, it is not entirely clear how and why these networks work. We take a step towards covering this gap by adopting a relational economic geography perspective and focusing on the benefits that emerge from the interactions and relationships between actors within networks. We focus on two crucial network actors: the initiator or promoter of the network (a provincial government agency) and the purposive participants (the municipalities). Our research is intended to explain why the promoter is successful in attracting participants and engaging them in intra-network interactions. Our findings suggest that specific network-driven benefits have varying outcomes which could be used to guide implementation approaches based upon the desired effect. We use data collected from 163 municipal managers who are members of an LA21 network in Girona, Catalonia.

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1. Introduction

Municipalities have a central role in promoting sustainability, given their closeness to the causes and solutions of many of the problems associated with this major goal. As the level of governance that is closest to people, local councils play a vital role in educating, mobilizing and responding to the public concerning issues that promote sustainability (Evans et al., 2006). Meanwhile, strategic planning may contribute important benefits for municipalities and be a vehicle for inclusive public management in a democratic society (Bryson and Alston, 2011). In consequence, diverse international forums have emphasized the need to promote long-term participatory strategic planning processes that address local sustainability.

In particular, the countries that participated in the Rio Summit (1992) subscribed, at least nominally, to the United Nations proposal to promote the devising and implementation of local sustainability strategies, known as Local Agenda 21 (LA21). LA21 is understood as a municipality-led, community-wide participatory

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effort to establish a comprehensive local strategic plan for tackling environmental, social, economic and cultural issues that lead to quality-of-life improvement (Barrutia et al., 2007). However, the response of local authorities is far from generalized, and became a major concern surrounding the 2012 Rio+20 Summit (Echebarria et al., 2009). In consequence, research efforts addressed at indicating possible paths towards a more across-the-board diffusion of locally-based SD strategies are needed. This research seeks to respond to this need by analyzing the experience of a specific province in Catalonia (Spain), Girona, which has developed a networking experience.

Previous research has studied LA21 processes in Europe and concluded that when LA21 is considered to be the sole responsibility of municipalities, higher levels of LA21 dissemination are unlikely to be achieved (Echebarria et al., 2009; Evans et al., 2006). A lack of sustainability- and LA21-related resources and capacities has been considered as an important brake on the spread of LA21 (Evans et al., 2006; Echebarria et al., 2009). In spite of these difficulties, however, diverse empirical evidence regarding LA21 seems to indicate that, in territories where multi-level governance arrangements have emerged, LA21 dissemination tends to be higher. These multi-level governance arrangements have usually been referred to as networks in LA21 literature. We adopt this term for practical reasons. Networks seem to constitute a launch pad for the explosion of initiatives of this kind (Barrutia et al., 2007; Eckerberg and Dahlgren, 2007).

However, it is not entirely clear how and why these networks work. We take a step towards covering this gap by adopting a relational economic geography perspective (Bathelt and Glückler, 2003; Bathelt, 2009; Boggs and Rantisi, 2003; Yeung, 2005) and focusing on the actors, their strategies and intentions, and the benefits that emerge from the interactions and relationships between actors within networks. We focus on two crucial network actors: the promoter of the network (in our empirical case a provincial government agency) and the purposive participants (the municipalities). Our research is intended to explain why the promoter is successful in attracting participants and engaging them in intra-network interactions.

As LA21 is a voluntary endeavor, and interactions involve costs (i.e., in terms of time spent, effort and energy), we can infer that municipal managers might perceive additional benefits when networking processes are implemented. However, the benefits emerging from LA21 networks have not been clearly and systematically identified. Building on multi-level environmental geography (Davis and Reed, 2013) and various related research streams (in particular, LA21, network management, collaborative management, and participation in networks), we identify two broad types of benefits: support benefits and interaction benefits. We study the joint effect of support benefits and interaction benefits on various municipal managers' perceptions of engagement.

Engagement means that municipal managers' perceptions of both the LA21 and the network are positive and even enthusiastic, and are therefore integrated in the local managers' mind-set and in municipal life (Bakker et al., 2008). Support benefits refer to a range of advantages that municipal managers perceive from the involvement of higher levels of government within the network. Higher levels of government are able to contribute various resources needed by municipalities in order to properly implement LA21, which include a range of complements to the focal LA21 tool such as financial support, training, methodologies, consultants and bi-directional communication channels with municipalities to jointly decide the support needed (Burch and Robinson, 2007). Interaction benefits refer to a realm of advantages arising from rich interaction between network members in municipality to municipality relations, and also at a municipality-to-promoter level. These advantages include learning, social enhancement, and the purposive benefits primarily pursued (risk sharing and having a useful medium term plan) (Adger, 2003; Davis and Reed, 2013; Dholakia et al., 2004; Eden, 2009; Störmer, 2008).

The remainder of the paper is structured as follows. The next section refers to the specific context of this research. The third section deals with the conceptual background that serves as a basis for this research. The fourth section develops the model and hypotheses that were quantitatively tested. The fifth and sixth sections explain in detail the major concepts used and measured in this research. The seventh section describes the data collection process. The eighth section deals with the model specification. The ninth section refers to the results of the empirical test. The final section presents discussion and conclusions and offers avenues for further research.

2. Research context: Girona network for the environment

The 1978 Spanish Constitution gave municipalities new responsibilities for the management of their environment. These powers include: territorial planning, water and lighting supply, waste collection and treatment, sewage and wastewater treatment, public passenger transport, environmental protection, and protection of public health. These enhanced competences gave rise to certain discrepancies, dysfunctions, and problems with other public authorities, and provincial councils and Autonomous Communities

in particular, due in the main to the lack of a clear definition of each of their powers.

Municipal, provincial and regional authorities became dependent, therefore, on cooperation and joint resource mobilization. Higher levels of government are aware that many important powers of relevance to sustainability are held by the municipalities. And they recognize that local councils are particularly adept at maintaining proximity to citizens and establishing effective communication with them. They are also aware that no LA21 strategy would work without contributions from municipalities, which would ultimately have to work on designing and establishing actions to improve sustainability. On the other hand, the municipalities are integrated within a provincial council, on which an important part of their financing depends. In addition, significant powers for achieving sustainability targets, such as inter-municipal transport, are in the hands of provincial or regional councils (Barrutia et al., 2007).

As a consequence, LA21 has been approached in Spain through regional and provincial networking. Regional- and provincial-level networking has positioned Spain as one of the leading countries in terms of LA21 dissemination in Europe (Echebarria et al., 2009). While dissemination is not necessarily equivalent to strong involvement and effectiveness, in Spain LA21 has brought local sustainability planning and new knowledge into play as part of the range of tools that may be used to assist sustainability goals.

One of the pioneering Spanish networks is the 'Girona network for the environment'. Girona is a province in north-eastern Spain, in the northern part of the Autonomous Community of Catalonia. It is bordered by the provinces of Barcelona and Lleida, and by France and the Mediterranean Sea. This province has 221 municipalities and 732 thousand people live in its territory. In 1999, the province of Girona created the Council of Local Initiatives for the Environment (in the Catalan language, Consell d'Inicatives Locals pel Medi Ambient, CILMA). Its objectives are to promote sustainable development within and among local authorities, to facilitate their work in elaborating LA21 and to advise them on any aspect related to sustainability. More specifically, the main CILMA aims are to: (1) constitute a cooperation and exchange tool for the sustainability of the municipalities of Girona, and for the implementation of LA21; (2) promote the integration of environmental aspects in the territorial, social and economic policies of municipalities; (3) disseminate updated information of good sustainability practices; (4) provide technical decision makers and local authorities with appropriate models, methods and techniques; (5) promote and enhance joint actions with other networks working in the field of sustainability; and (6) mobilize efforts for the sake of a common goal, by promoting the inclusion of all sectors and social agents of the municipalities in the LA21 process.

The fact that there was only a relatively scarce experience and tradition of sustainability presented an important difficulty for the spread of LA21 processes in the province, when the network was set up in 1999. Yet what has been achieved is a broad dissemination of LA21 processes. The network has 171 members representing 77.4% of the municipalities in the region. The provincial council had to act as a promoter of the network.

Motivation to participate in the network is fuelled by different benefits in the form of funding, learning, methodologies and recognition, among others. The promoter and the municipalities are jointly working in various areas. For instance, they collaborate to prevent global warming by reducing municipal energy consumption, increasing use of renewable energy resources, making a more appropriate use of water, implementing green purchasing policies, and promoting sustainable mobility.

The running of the network is shared by all the stakeholders. Consensus is sought by joint planning involving discussions on a range of issues and the collective ironing out of obstacles. Two

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