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Stakeholder diversity and the comprehensiveness of sustainability decisions: the role of collaboration and conflict

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We review the literature (2007–2016) on the quality of sustainability decisions and we introduce an integrative conceptual framework that distinguishes between a beneficial and a detrimental path that explain the influence of stakeholder diversity on the comprehensiveness of sustainability decisions. We argue that decision quality increases when stakeholder interest diversity is expressed through task conflict (extensive information sharing and exploration). Decision quality is compromised if stakeholder diversity is suppressed and false consensus occurs, that is, when task conflict is not tolerated or when decision makers fail to acknowledge and work with their differences. We conclude by discussing three generic recommendations that focus on inclusive stakeholder selection, norms for engagement and process consultation as ways of developing constructive collaboration in multiparty systems.

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Introduction

Sustainability decisions have important consequences for large scale sustainable development in the domain of natural resources, urban development, renewable energy production and efficient energy use. It is of critical importance to make high quality decisions with positive economic, environmental and social outcomes [1•]. Decision comprehensiveness reflects the richness of the knowledge pool scrutinized and integrated during the decision-making process and it is a key antecedent of decision quality. In participatory approaches stakeholders from social, economic and environmental domains may participate or give input in sustainability decision-making [1•,2,3]. In such participatory approaches stakeholders explore their interdependencies and use their knowledge and expertise in order to integrate and develop their different perspectives and interests [4–6]. Our review explores the factors that influence the comprehensiveness of sustainability decisions in which diverse stakeholders are engaged in a collaborative decision-making process [7]. We will refer to systems that implement such participatory approaches as multiparty collaborative systems. In these systems, the diverse perspectives that are brought to the table by various stakeholders are expected to increase decision comprehensiveness (referring to exhaustive and inclusive strategic choices) [8] and ultimately decision quality. Although stakeholder diversity is a requisite component of multiparty collaborative systems, it also induces conflict [9•,10,11•,12•]. Collaboration and conflict are intertwined processes that shape the dynamics of multiparty collaborative systems [4]. In this paper we review the recent literature on sustainability decision-making (2007–2016) and explore the mechanisms that link stakeholder diversity with decision comprehensiveness. We first present an integrative framework that describes the interplay between collaboration and conflict in decision-making groups, building on recent theoretical and empirical insights from the group dynamics and multiparty collaboration literature. We then describe the literature review process and map the findings of the most relevant studies addressing sustainability decision-making on the framework we presented. We conclude by presenting three ways in which sustainability decision comprehensiveness can be improved.

A model of diversity and sustainability decision comprehensiveness

Decision comprehensiveness is a measure of rationality [13]. It reflects the efforts to be exhaustive, inclusive and integrative in the decision-making process [8]. Comprehensive sustainability decisions will ultimately lead to positive outcomes in the social (e.g. stakeholder satisfaction), economic (e.g. increased profits) and environmental

(e.g. low energy consumption and emission rates) domains [3]. It is therefore of critical importance to better understand the mechanisms through which stakeholder diversity influences the comprehensiveness and thus the quality of sustainability decisions.

Recent reviews on diversity [14] stress the dual impact of diversity on the quality of group decisions. On the one hand diverse groups benefit from knowledge elaboration by pooling the expertise, preferences and skills of diverse group members, while on the other hand, diversity triggers relationship frictions and threatens the social harmony within groups. These two opposing mechanisms explain the beneficial as well as the detrimental effects of diversity in decision-making groups [14]. Diversity is an intrinsic property of multiparty collaborative systems. It is a requirement for making sustainability decisions [5,11•,15•,16]. Parties need to work with their differences in terms of interests, power, perspectives and identities, etc. and generate comprehensive views on the decision space by engaging in task conflict. However, working with different parties also triggers negative stereotyping, distrust, scapegoating; it generates relationship conflict and it threatens the social harmony of such collaborative systems [4–6]. Task conflict and relationship conflict often occur together, as task related disagreements can develop in relational frictions [17]. We argue that successful multiparty collaboration requires parties to engage in task conflict and at the same time prevent or successfully manage relationship conflict [4].

Sometimes parties with diverse interests seem to engage in harmonious interactions with relationship conflict virtually absent while avoiding task conflict. Such dynamics might be due to false consensus generated by the suppression of diversity in order to avoid the threats associated with conflicts and maintain an illusion of social harmony [4,18]. Parties do not engage in fruitful information exchange and constructive task conflict, therefore true collaboration is obstructed and decision comprehensiveness reduced. Once such dynamics are unveiled and reality is confronted, the tensions that engaging in task conflict induce, may surface. As a consequence, relationship conflict is likely to emerge. Alternatively, if these tensions are handled adequately, parties may learn to overcome them and reap the cognitive benefits of task conflict. Figure 1 depicts the integrative conceptual model of the arguments presented above. The key paths presented in Figure 1 will further be explained as we review the relevant literature on sustainability decisions.

Literature search and integration procedure

Research on sustainability decision-making is broad in scope, extremely prolific and dynamic, with hundreds of papers published each year on various topics ranging from water governance [19] to urban planning [20,21] and supply chain management [22]. Given this wealth of literature we have used a stepwise procedure with the aim of identifying papers that explore the collective decision-making process. We initially searched documents published between 2007 and 2016 and recorded in the Scientific Citation Index (SCI) of the Web of Science (WoS) databases using the terms: 'sustainability decision* & conflict' (initially yielded 371 hits), 'sustainability decision* & diversity' (240 hits), 'sustainability decision* & participation' (523 hits) and 'sustainability decision* & collaboration' (206 hits).

We first selected the review papers from this initial pool. Out of seventy review papers only ten addressed participatory approaches in sustainability decision-making. These ten review papers (marked with * in the reference list) were the starting point for our review and we have used these to cross-validate the analytical framework presented in Figure 1. A notable aspect is that none of these review papers directly addressed the beneficial role of conflict in collaboration. The dominant view was that conflict hampers collaboration and as such is detrimental to the comprehensiveness of sustainability decisions. Our integrative framework presented in Figure 1 complements these reviews by differentiating between task and relationship conflict and by taking into account false consensus as a disruptive process in collaborative systems.

Further on, from the original pool of papers yielded by the initial WoS search, we have excluded papers with a normative or prescriptive approach to sustainability decision-making as well as the papers that focused on decision content rather than process. Our focus was on papers (especially published in 2015 and 2016) that explored the collective decision-making process. We have selected all papers reporting case studies or other empirical analyses of participatory practices in sustainability decision-making. Our review integrates the insights of this stepwise analysis along the conceptual relations depicted in Figure 1.

Diversity expressed — the cognitive synergy path

Situations in which stakeholders are interdependent while their interests differ in substantive ways, often call for collaboration [18]. In the sustainability literature, collaboration is often conceptualized as a process that leads to superior outcomes in terms of decision quality and acceptance [9•,23•]; its outcomes furthermore, are often portrayed as consensual and nonconflictual. Fadeeva challenges this view by arguing that striving for consensus may lead to a superficial discussion of relevant issues and may disregard the interests of particular stakeholders [24,p. 173]. We subscribe to this view and argue that task conflict is a necessary condition for

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