Voices for environmental action? Analyzing narrative in environmental governance networks in the Pacific Islands

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A B S T R A C T

As climate change pushes against the shorelines of the Pacific Islands, strategies to coalesce power to mitigate for and adapt to environmental degradation become even more relevant. One mechanism employed by the Pacific Islands to overcome conflict is the formation of climate networks that work together to meet the needs of the islands as a region. During this process of networked governance, however, contestations occur between the local and global strategies and knowledges that must be navigated by state and nonstate organizations in these networks in order to achieve their respective aims. In order to gain authority to make decisions and govern on climate issues, these networks employ particular narratives—constructions of the hero, victim, and villain, both human and nonhuman, in the story of climate policy—that both produce and are produced by these local/global contestations. This article explores these issues in the context of the Pacific Island Forum and Pacific Island Development Forum summits leading up to the 2015 Conference of the Parties, and their final climate declarations. Through this investigation, two competing narratives are found—the global technical narrative and the local power narrative. These narratives impacted the deliberations and subsequent climate declarations in these Pacific summits, with both the global technical narrative of the Pacific Island Forum summit and the local power narrative of the Pacific Island Development Forum summit being evident in their final declarations. These narrative constructions have consequences for the representativeness of the decisions made in these networks.

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1. Introduction

Transboundary environmental issues—biodiversity loss, water scarcity, sea level rise, and others—are pushing their way into governance priorities at unprecedented rates, ensuring that single states alone cannot accomplish the goals of governing (Biermann and Pattberg, 2012). Due to the nature of these environmental challenges, a decentralization of governance is occurring in which power and authority is distributed across multiple arenas, or 'spheres of authority' (Rosenau, 2007) that function between and outside of state boundaries. The spheres of authority include nonstate actors that face very different challenges from states when trying to impact governance.

Networks are growing in prominence as one way of investigating these complex spheres of authority within transnational environmental governance (e.g. Andonova et al., 2009; Hadden, 2015; Keck and Sikkink, 1998; Stone, 2008). Wasserman and Faust (1994) define networks as a relatively stable grouping of actors that function through interdependent actions and are marked by their exchange of material and non-material resources. Governance networks have generally been defined loosely in the literature, but Rhodes (1997) emphasizes that, while they include state actors, the networks themselves can function with relative autonomy from the state. These networks maneuver through multiple scales of governance in efforts to meet the needs of local communities, of domestic policy strategies, and of international policy agreements and requirements for funding. During this process of multi-scalar governance, however, contestations occur between the local and global strategies and knowledges (Jasanoff and Martello, 2004; Hulme, 2010) that must be navigated by state and nonstate organizations in these networks in order to achieve their respective aims. One mechanism by which this navigation occurs is through the narrative of organizations within the networks.

The narrative of a network is the shared structure of the story it tells when working to accomplish its goals. Narrative does productive work within the process of governance in a variety of ways—it determines the goals and problems to be solved, identifies tools to solve the problem, distributes the benefits and burdens of policy and implementation, creates rules for inclusion

and exclusion, and generates rationales that legitimate these choices (McBeth et al., 2014). In other words, narrative not only limits what is possible within governance, it also works to create the possible. Identifying the role of narrative provides key insights into the ways in which networks emerge and establish their authority for governance. As networks work across local/global divides, the power of narrative is both a strategy of negotiation in this multi-scalar space and a product of this negotiation. In other words, narrative is used to bolster the authority of networks of organizations as organizations transform the narrative to meet their own ends, and is also a durable product of that negotiation that has been institutionalized into dominant discourses. Therefore, it is informative to study the way in which various actors are employing narratives, as well as how those narratives came to be.

The Pacific Islands provide an excellent case study by which to explore these dynamics of international and multi-sectoral networking. The islands are undergoing rapid biophysical transformation, which is decreasing the productivity of fisheries, reducing the likelihood that communities can subsist off of the land or water, and seeing a rapid loss of land into the ocean (Allen et al., 2014). Each of these aspects threatens the vitality of the Pacific Islands as the effects of climate change become more severe. However, governance in this region faces challenges as many nations are small, isolated, and have had a long history of colonial control, which has left them with reduced governance capacity (Wesley-Smith, 2013). They have experienced varying levels of success at integrating traditional and Western power structures, institutions, sciences, and narratives within their systems. However, Pacific Island peoples also have a long history of social and environmental adaptation that provides key knowledge to these growing environmental needs (Govan, 2009), thus providing unique opportunities for environmental governance.

During the 21st Conference of the Parties in 2015 [COP21] climate change negotiation preparation, two dominant narratives were employed in the Pacific Islands that distinguished two network constructions for negotiation stances. This paper will further explore what I call the *global technical narrative* employed by many regional intergovernmental organizations that manifested in the Pacific Islands Forum [PIF] Summit's Pacific Islands Forum Leaders Declaration on Climate Change, alongside the *local power narrative* employed by local NGOs during the writing of the Pacific Island Development Forum [PIDF] Summit's Suva Declaration on Climate Change. Through this paper, I will consider the way in which international climate networks are emerging and establishing authority in transnational environmental governance. I will then look to the way that, as organizations network around environmental issues, struggles over local and global knowledges work through the narrative used by these networks. Finally, I will consider the implications of these narrative-networks for climate change governance in the Pacific Islands.

2. International climate networks

Power to impact decision-making flows throughout state and nonstate actors within governance networks, in the bureaucracies and secretariats of international organizations (Barnett and Finnemore, 1999, 2004; Jinnah, 2010), knowledge-producing institutions (Miller, 2007; Miller and Edwards, 2001), and standard-setting institutions (Boström and Hallström, 2010; Cashore, 2002), all of which take part in and form the networks of environmental governance. These organizations produce new ways of knowing about environmental issues including information about processes and procedures, knowledge about the physical and social world, and the limits of what is considered possible and acceptable. These things can help to facilitate cooperation and shared understanding among network members,

and at times the global polity. Organizations within these networks have power to impact decision-making at the state level by producing and sharing information on which state decisions are based (Adler and Haas, 1992; Haas, 1989; Jasanoff, 2005; Keck and Sikkink, 1998; Miller, 2007; Scholte, 2004; Wapner, 1995), providing practical support for program implementation (Abers and Keck, 2013), and producing norms to which states adhere (Finnemore and Sikkink, 1998; Keck and Sikkink, 1998; Rosenau, 2007).

Navigating multi-scalar governance, however, is confounded through the contestations over authority. The participants in governance networks gain authority through their access to practical authority (Abers and Keck, 2013), rational-legal authority (Barnett and Finnemore, 1999, 2004), and expert authority gained through the generation, accumulation, and dissemination of knowledge (Barnett and Finnemore, 1999, 2004; Carrozza, 2014; Hulme, 2013). This is not a singular event, but rather a continuous struggle as organizations work to authorize their ideas and practices. This authority is challenged as nonstate actors function outside of democratic authority, which makes transparency and accountability more challenging (Biermann and Gupta, 2011; Vaubel, 2006). Transnational governance is semi-private or quasi-public and dispersed through restricted sites, where boundaries are "indeterminate and opaque" (Stone, 2008)). In other words, the authority held by nonstate actors that work in and through transnational environmental governance networks can shift power away from the, potentially, more transparent and accountable public sphere. Therefore, the basis of the authority held by networked environmental governance organizations must be further explored.

3. Scientific authority in multi-Scalar space

Contestations over authority within environmental governance are intertwined with what is considered legitimate knowledge. One of the primary divides within climate governance comes in the local and global strategies and knowledges and their struggles to be authoritative (Jasanoff and Martello, 2004; Hulme, 2010). Global knowledges tend to emulate what Bocking (2004) refers to as *authoritative science*—knowledge gained through procedures that are unanimous, quantitative, generalized, and conducted according to scientific process. This type of knowledge meets the challenges of scaling knowledge to a global level by collapsing the nuance of local conditions. The objectivity of scientific procedure is used as a strategy to gain authority for decision-making, thus giving scientific knowledge, and those who employ it, the power to shape decision-making. As Turnhout et al. (2016) describe it, "Knowledge and power embrace tightly as globalized knowledge conditions the political imaginary of global environmental governance and vice versa: how one knows constrains how one governs and how one governs shapes what one needs to know" (2016, no page). In other words, the use of global, objective, authoritative science can shape what is perceived as possible within transnational environmental governance.

This type of global scientific knowledge plays a vitally important role in the governance of the climate due to the nature of global atmospheric change. By appealing to authoritative science, however, transnational environmental networks can leave local communities out of environmental decisions that impact their lives, thereby breaking down democratic processes. As Hulme describes it, this type of science makes 'global kinds of knowledge,' or "knowledge which erases geographical and cultural difference and in which scale collapses to the global" (2010, p. 559). He gives the example of the way in which the 2 °C [Celsius] limit on global warming has been used by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change [IPCC] to stabilize normative goals around the climate and