



Translating bioenergy policy in Europe: Mutation, aims and boosterism in EU energy governance



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ABSTRACT

Supranational policies move from their places of spatial design towards domestic and local materialization, a journey on which policy programs are subject to multiple loops of translation in various spatial contexts. These loops involve shifting rationalities, historically formed path dependencies and distinct constellations of stakeholders, all of which affect the means of their implementation within national and regional socio-spatial environments. This article evaluates the complexity of governance assemblages based on the translation and mutation of European Union bioenergy policies. As part of the transition towards a low carbon economy, EU member states have been given the responsibility to choose their own approaches within the common EU 2020 renewable energy framework. While EU documents highlight energy security, energy union and sustainability, a contested policy translation process reformulates governance means and aims along the way and sometimes causes the generic targets to vanish. Thus, context dependent decision making assemblages are portrayed as shaping the policy process and the advancement of renewable energy in various directions. The article bundles the empirical results of case studies in Finland, Germany, Estonia, France, and Norway, as well as EU institutions in Brussels to conceptualize peculiarities that guide policy design, translation and boosterist processes in transnational governance.

1. Introduction

As a part of the EU transition towards renewable energy systems and a low-carbon economy each member state can choose their own approaches within the common EU 2020 target framework and the 2030 energy strategy. EU 2020 low-carbon policy documents highlight security of supply, sustainability of the energy sector and internal (energy) market development as key targets (RED, 2009; EC, 2010; Scarlat et al., 2015). Additionally, EU environmental policy is one of the main drivers for the development of a common EU renewable energy policy (Solorio, 2011). Nevertheless, when moving from EU nodes of policy design towards materialization policy programs are subject to multiple loops of translation and shifting rationalities concerning the implementation of objectives. Not only are there frequent shifts towards economic aims (Kortelainen and Albrecht, 2014) but the aims, approaches and results of policy also change in various settings (Albrecht, 2015, 2017; Kortelainen and Rytteri, 2017).

Consequently, a wide variety of more or less ambitious national and regional approaches, programs and policies have emerged (Albrecht, 2015, 2017; Sarrica et al., 2016; Lindstad et al., 2015), with some

entities actively attempting to “boost” their sustainable credentials (e.g. McCann, 2013) while others merely invest minimal efforts. The result is a heterogeneous and rather unstable space and understanding of EU renewable energy governance, which is too often constituted as normative accounts on best-practices, generalized barriers or scale bound institutional approaches in academic research (e.g. McCormick and Kåberger, 2007; Plieninger et al., 2009; Scarlat et al., 2015). Although these accounts contribute to the understanding of the processes which constitute renewable energy governance or portray the impacts of policy programs (e.g. Lupp et al., 2014; Lindstad et al., 2015), they lack a conceptual generalization of relational governance processes and fail to embed accounts within the shifting properties of spatiotemporal settings between the nodes of policy design and sites of materialization and vice versa.

Our study focuses on the conceptual generalization of governance processes within the EU policy framework and thereby moves beyond a single case, program or fixed level approach. We employ an approach which is framed by social scientific trends on policy transfer, mobility and mutation in political geography (e.g. Dolowitz and Marsh, 2000; Bulmer et al., 2007; Peck, 2011; Peck and Theodore, 2010, 2015; Clarke

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et al., 2015; McCann and Ward, 2012). The socio-spatiality of policy mobility is dealt with by deploying the concept of translation loops, contextual multi-stakeholder interactions which transport and affect policies as they move within governance spaces (Kortelainen and Albrecht, 2014; Albrecht, 2017). Translation loops enable us to simultaneously study the more official interactions between various political entities as well as go beyond the bureaucratic sphere and interpret mobile policies as open and relational processes. It displays the interactions of various actors and their socio-spatial contexts as elemental aspects of policy processes and their mobility.

With an empirical foundation based on a variety of national and regional bioenergy policies and development approaches in five countries: Finland, Germany, Estonia, Norway and France, as well as EU decision making contexts in Brussels, this study not only presents different cases and approaches but also places them in the transnational context of EU renewable energy governance. Thus, with a critical perspective on the rationalities of policy design and materialization, the aims of the paper's conceptualization of governance processes are twofold. First, it discusses policy mobility and mutation processes through a transnational socio-spatial perspective to provide an improved understanding for the theoretical and political implications of EU policy design and materialization. Second, based on expert interviews in the five countries and at the EU level, we evaluate translation processes and display the interactive processes and relations between various loops of policy design and materialization. This provides different examples of the effects of policy implementation for the aims, materialization practices and direction of feedback for EU energy policy.

Additionally, we emphasize the conceptualization of ways that ideas, best practices, economic interests and other aspects affecting policies are actively made mobile by different translation processes. We distinguish several such means, like feedback, contestation and boosterism (Kortelainen and Albrecht, 2014; McCann, 2013), that derive from within the various processes of translation and mutation. These relational aspects play an important role in the processes of uploading, downloading, transferring and mobilizing ideas to adjust policy design (Bulmer et al., 2007) and they improve conceptual understanding of energy governance within the EU and beyond.

2. Methods

We study energy policy from a social-scientific approach rooted in critical geography to shift the balance in predominantly natural science and economy based energy research (see Sovacool, 2014). Therefore, the empirical data of this study is based on multiple qualitative case studies and rounds of interviews conducted from 2011–2015 in Finland, Germany, Estonia, France, Norway and with EU level actors in Brussels (see Fig. 1). This selection is not intended to supply a comprehensive comparison of EU member approaches; rather, it portrays EU bioenergy governance based on examples from geographically, socio-economically and politically diverse cultures to better understand policy translation. Germany is a federation, Finland represents Nordic conditions, Estonia is a post-socialist society, Norway is a non-EU state and Reunion Island (France) provides an example from the EU's extremity. Case selection was also motivated by the authors' expertise on these particular regions.

Together, the empirical data consists of 115 qualitative interviews (Fig. 1.) with “interpretively competent voices” (Holstein and Gubrium, 1995, 20), of which 110 are face to face and five phone interviews lasting from 20 min to three hours. Additionally, empirical data derives from participation in 14 bioenergy policy related conferences, seminars and workshops in Finland, France and Brussels. The interviews were conducted with actors from government institutions, NGOs, industry associations, lobby groups, local entrepreneurs, bioenergy development schemes and administrative bodies as well as with officials from different EU institutions. The methods of the individual case studies are

described in more detail elsewhere (Albrecht, 2015, 2017; Kortelainen and Rytteri, 2017; Lukkarinen, 2015; Sawatzky and Albrecht, 2017). In combination with secondary sources, such as policy and legal documents, academic literature and other documents from the respective regions, energy sectors and beyond, this data set provides the study with a solid foundation from which to draw conceptual generalizations (Yin, 2006) on EU bioenergy governance.

3. Governance assemblages of policy mutation and socio-spatial translations

EU policies possess power-topologies, which refers to the relations that enable their influence to be felt at a distance. Power-topologies “come into play when the reach of actors enables them to make their presence felt in more or less powerful ways that cut across proximity and distance” (Allen, 2011, 284). Topologically interpreted, power is a relational phenomenon generated through practices and relationships within networks which enable some actors and policies to reach and be present in distant places. Transnational policies and governance exist only if their presence is felt in numerous distant places. Their power-topologies (i.e. their abilities to reach distant destinations) are based on ‘far-reaching’ relations which require entities that circulate and maintain these relations. This means, firstly, that policy itself has to be transported over long distances and, secondly, that this task is carried out by circulating multiple texts, individuals or other intermediaries carrying the rules, standards and ideas among constituents.

To possess such power of reach EU renewable energy policy has to be mobile to deliver certain generic ideas to variegated socio-spatial realms, but it also has to simultaneously enable the translation of policies as they move from policy design to materialization and vice versa (McCann and Ward, 2012; Peck, 2011; Kortelainen and Albrecht, 2014). Political documents acquire problems and representations, as well as claims made for and about them by different actors. Contextual stakeholders recast these claims as questions and positions, interpreting and converting them to decisions, programs and instruments (Freeman, 2009). Mukhtarov (2014, 76) defines policy translation as, “the process of modification of policy ideas and creation of new meanings and designs in the process of the cross-jurisdictional travel of policy ideas.” In other words, it refers to the mutation of traveling policy when common definitions of the policy instruments, as well as the roles and identities of actors, are negotiated and settled in different contexts (e.g. Clarke et al., 2015). This includes the setting of objectives and calculations which are carried out in order to reproduce the original policy ideas while meshing with the requirements and problematizations of each context. Policy makers and advocates aim to make sense of policy and seek to make it meaningful and workable. Moreover, policy has to be socially embedded in the target audience by connecting it to particular problems or opportunities within each locality, region or nation (Jones et al., 2014; Armstrong and Bulkeley, 2014; Albrecht, 2017).

Both political science researchers and geographers have studied ways how policy moves and transforms in space. Having its roots in policy diffusion and lesson learning studies, policy transfer research in political science since the 1990s has focused on how policy-related ideas, systems and institutions developed in one political jurisdiction are transported to another and how they transform along the way (e.g. Dolowitz and Marsh, 1996; Benson and Jordan, 2012). More recently, political geographers have criticized conventional transfer studies for neglecting the social context of policy making and developed a relational notion of political mobility and mutation which is a social-constructivist concept and highly sensitive to the constitutive roles of spatiotemporal contexts (e.g. Peck, 2011; Cochrane and Ward, 2012; Peck and Theodore, 2015). Although the two traditions have a conflicting relationship, both policy transfer and policy mobility refer to processes in which the ideas, institutions and programs developed in one political system and spatial context are fed into and translated by another system and political landscape (Dolowitz and Marsh, 1996;

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