



# Building or stumbling blocks? Assessing the performance of polycentric energy and climate governance networks

Benjamin K. Sovacool<sup>a,b,\*</sup>, Thijs Van de Graaf<sup>c</sup>

<sup>a</sup> Science Policy Research Unit (SPRU), School of Business, Management, and Economics, University of Sussex, East Sussex BN1 9SL, United Kingdom

<sup>b</sup> Center for Energy Technologies, Department of Business Development and Technology, Aarhus University, Birk Centerpark 15, DK-7400 Herning, Denmark

<sup>c</sup> Ghent Institute for International Studies, Department of Political Science, Ghent University, Universiteitstraat 8, 9000 Ghent, Belgium

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## ABSTRACT

Polycentric governance networks are on the rise in global energy and climate governance, but we know surprisingly little about their empirical performance. This paper analyzes the performance of four such transnational energy and climate governance networks. In the realm of sustainable energy, our cases are the Renewable Energy and Energy Efficiency Partnership (REEEP) and the Global Alliance for Clean Cookstoves (GACC). In the climate sphere, we examine the effectiveness of the Green Climate Fund (GCF) and the Clinton Climate Initiative (CCI). Using principles from governance and public administration about the effectiveness of institutions, we examine the extent to which four networks have contributed to improving governance outcomes in the spheres of climate and sustainable energy. Our evaluation focuses on the clarity of purpose, funding, institutional formality, efficacy, and level of resilience of these networks. Some differences notwithstanding, we find that the transnational governance networks generally fail to meet the criteria about what constitutes an effective institution. The paper concludes with a reflection on what could be done to enhance the performance of these governance networks.

## 1. Introduction

The Paris Agreement, adopted in December 2015, epitomizes an important shift in global climate governance. Whereas early efforts to tackle climate change concentrated on negotiating a global agreement with binding targets—the Kyoto Protocol being a paradigmatic example—the focus has gradually shifted to less top-down, more diverse and more multi-levelled governance frameworks. The nationally determined contributions (NDCs) which were prepared by all parties to the Paris Agreement are but one indicator of this trend. In addition to action at the state level, a ‘groundswell’ of climate actions has emerged as cities, regions, businesses and civil society groups have started to step up their acts on mitigation and adaptation (Chan et al., 2015; Hale, 2016). As a result, the climate governance landscape has started to exhibit some of the characteristics of what Ostrom called ‘polycentric systems’—that is, systems characterized by multiple governing authorities at differing scales rather than a monocentric unit (Jordan et al., 2015; Sovacool, 2011a, 2011b; Ostrom, 2010; Dorsch and Flachsland, 2017). It is also having to attune itself to more active attempts at rapid transition or ‘deep decarbonisation’ (Geels et al., 2017).

A variety of new terms have come to describe polycentrism as it has

become more important in theoretical and empirical policy debates. Whether referring to ‘polycentrism’ (Ostrom, 2010), ‘building blocks’ (Stewart et al., 2013; Falkner et al., 2010), ‘regime complexes’ (Keohane and Victor, 2011; Abbott, 2012; Colgan et al., 2012), ‘polyphonic federalism’ (Sovacool, 2011a, 2011b) or ‘bottom-up approaches’ (Rayner, 2010), there is recognition that global climate governance has increasingly come to encompass action by sub- and non-state actors (Cole, 2015; Hale, 2016). What makes a polycentric approach so attractive is that it avoids using the ‘government’ or the ‘state’ as the single point of reference (Ostrom, 2010; Cole, 2015). As other authors who adhere to a polycentric approach have noted, ‘polycentric networks transcend the traditional ideas of jurisdictional integrity in state-centric systems’ (Skelcher, 2005: p. 89).

Other voices are more critical of the shift from ‘government’ to ‘governance’. According to these critics, governance networks and partnerships ‘can lead to a ‘hollowing out’ of the state, reinforce neoliberalism and accelerate privatization of environmental governance, [...] increased business influence, power inequalities and skewed representation of stakeholders, fragmentation of global governance, reinforcement of elite multilateralism and the retreat of state responsibility in the production of public goods’ (Bäckstrand, 2008, p. 78).

\* Corresponding author at: Center for Energy Technologies, Department of Business Development and Technology, Aarhus University, Birk Centerpark 15, DK-7400 Herning, Denmark.  
E-mail address: [BenjaminSo@hih.au.dk](mailto:BenjaminSo@hih.au.dk) (B.K. Sovacool).

Besides accountability issues, questions are also raised over the effectiveness of polycentric approaches to climate governance. Jordan et al. (2015), for example, argue that 'before we raise our hopes, we should better understand how the new forms of governing are actually (not) performing' (Jordan et al., 2015: p. 3).

Heeding that call, this paper qualitatively analyzes the performance of governance networks in the energy and climate sphere. Using principles from governance and public administration about the effectiveness of institutions, we examine the extent to which four such polycentric governance networks have contributed to improving governance outcomes in the spheres of climate and sustainable energy. Put another way, we examine network effectiveness, or the ability for that network to meet its own missions and goals. In the realm of sustainable energy, our cases are the Renewable Energy and Energy Efficiency Partnership (REEEP) and the Global Alliance for Clean Cookstoves (GACC). In the climate sphere, we examine the effectiveness of the Green Climate Fund (GCF) and the Clinton Climate Initiative (CCI).

The remainder of this paper starts with a discussion of our research methods and key concepts, and outlines our polycentric governance assessment framework. Next, the paper discusses and evaluates the four case studies in light of this framework. We conclude with a reflection on options to enhance the effectiveness of these governance networks.

## 2. Research methods: qualitative case study analysis

The purpose of this study is to examine the performance of transnational 'polycentric governance networks' in the domains of climate and energy. Transnational networks are defined by Andonova et al. (2009) as sharing three key features. First, they operate in the transnational sphere instead of being domestic governance networks. Second, they seek to address some form of public goal. Third and most importantly, they are composed of various actors and organizations that recognize the authority of the network, but are also recognized by network authorities as legitimate parts of the network. The constituents of such networks may be public bodies and actors, private ones, or a mix thereof (Andonova et al., 2009). Transnational governance networks, by definition, are therefore polycentric.

Our core method is a qualitative, comparative, case study approach drawn from a synthesis of peer-reviewed literature as well as current reports and documents related to our four polycentric energy and climate networks. The cases have been selected on the basis of their budget (i.e., they all have funding in the order of multiple millions of dollars), duration of existence (i.e., they all exist since at least 2010), operational span (i.e., they all operate transnationally), scope (they all focus on aspects related to either sustainable energy or climate mitigation) and network governance character (they fit a three-tiered definition as described above). The resulting sample of cases was expected to share enough background conditions to be considered a homogenous population, while still exhibiting considerable variation in governance characteristics.

Since our study is explicitly structured by a well-developed conceptual framework that focuses attention on some theoretically specified aspects of reality and neglects others, our research method corresponds to what has been called interpretive (Lijphart, 1971: 691) or disciplined-configurative (Eckstein, 1975: 99–104) case studies. To be fair, our assessment of effectiveness is therefore shorter term, and it would not capture longer durations that may be more suitable to analyzing effectiveness (Sabatier, 1986). In addition, there hardly exist in-depth studies of these cases, some exceptions notwithstanding (e.g., Pattberg et al., 2009; Parthan et al., 2010; Szulecki et al., 2011; Vanderheiden, 2015; Widerberg and Striple, 2016).

## 3. Polycentric governance assessment framework

Polycentrism, a form of governance that blends scales and/or types

of actors (Visseren-Hamakers, 2015; Galaz et al., 2012) is related to the more recent literature on 'network governance' and 'governance networks'. McGinnis and Ostrom (2012) note that the concept of polycentricity, first laid out by Michael Polanyi (1951) and later adopted by Vincent Ostrom et al. (1961), can be seen as an early statement of the critical importance of network forms of governance in democratic societies. Yet, the more recent literature on network governance and governance networks rarely makes any mention to this pioneering work (Klijn and Koppenjan, 2012), despite the similarity of the concepts. Nonetheless, the 'governance networks' that are formed by actors from the state, the market and civil society to address climate change can be said to provide 'polycentric governance' in the sense that they include the self-organizing relationship between many centers of decision-making that are formally independent of each other (Ostrom et al., 1961: p. 831; Ostrom, 2010).

In this section we propose five criteria, drawn mostly from the literature on public administration, policy sciences, and governance, to assess the performance of polycentric energy and climate networks, building on an earlier study by Poocharoen and Sovacool (2012). We employ the term 'performance', which allows for a more contextualized evaluation compared with the concept of 'effectiveness'. Whereas effectiveness usually refers to 'outcome' (i.e., goal attainment), performance refers more to 'process' (i.e., the manner by which outputs and outcomes are achieved). Here, we argue it includes the ability of the network to (1) set clear goals; (2) mobilize resources; (3) adopt formal structures; (4) make internal operations more efficient; and (5) exhibit resilience. We maintain that these criteria are fundamental elements of organizational and institutional arrangements applicable to network settings. We now discuss each criterion in detail.

### 3.1. Clarity of purpose

It is intuitive that effective networks should have a clear sense of their goals and missions. Goal orientation of network members is a crucial part to make the network long-lasting. For any entity to measure the level of success first it must have a sense of purpose for its existence. Goals, missions, visions, objectives are expressions of an entity's purpose. Networks with clearly stated goals will often also have clear roles and responsibilities among members (Goodin, 1998). Also studies have shown that the success of a network is partly determined by whether there is alignment with different levels of goals of member agencies (Provan and Kenis, 2008). Clarity of purpose does not occur naturally but rather members must go through a process to have dialogues which creates a discourse to shape ideas and common understandings (Poocharoen and Sovacool, 2012).

### 3.2. Funding

Though funding can come with strings attached, implying a loss of autonomy and authority for the recipient governance network, a sufficient independent and continual source of funding is an important criterion to judge the effectiveness of networks. Often networks rely on their members to pool resources to implement network-led projects. The dilemma may arise where organizations, as members of networks, are also struggling to secure their funding and make use of their limited funds. Giving such resources away to the network might not be in their best interest. In addition, often network-led programs have multiple goals in nature, which may make them less attractive to donors or potential sponsors. Networks that can overcome such problems are prone to be more effective (Poocharoen and Sovacool, 2012).

### 3.3. Institutional formality

Institutional formality refers to two aspects: whether the network has formal recognition; and whether partners have a formal structure to interact. Some indicators of having formal recognition include having a

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