Examining the Role of NGOs in urban environmental governance

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ABSTRACT

I conduct an ethnography of the public policy processes around urban environmental governance in Boston, MA; Philadelphia, PA; and Baltimore, MD. In particular, I examine the structure and functioning of the public policy networks of the urban tree initiatives in order to investigate the expanding role of NGOs in public service delivery, especially related to sustainability and climate adaptation. This study concludes that urban partnerships often lack network structures that exhibit the centralization and hierarchy to roll out public programs smoothly. An overly horizontal structure leads to overlaps and gaps in management functions. Inadequate hierarchical control by public agencies increases the likelihood of gridlocks in service delivery. From an urban governance perspective, the prominent role of NGOs increases accountability of the public programs in certain limited capacities, while it creates systemic risks that compromise their legitimacy in ways that merit further investigation.

1. Introduction

Former Mayor Thomas Menino chose to announce Boston's tree planting initiative on Arbor Day 2007, which is also the city's annual neighborhood clean-up day. As he stood with a shovel in his hand on a vacant lot in Bowdoin-Geneva, a low-income neighborhood of color, he told community members of the City's commitment to increase the urban tree canopy by 20% within the next 15 years. Cameras flashed as Menino tossed dirt onto a newly planted tree, and thus began the city's initiative. But while the press conference had been organized by the mayor's office, the event itself was part of a series of tree plantings coordinated by two area NGOs, YouthBuild Boston and the Eagle Eye Institute. In parallel fashion, the mayor's office was the entity to announce the tree planting initiative, but it placed NGO The Urban Ecology Institute— to its surprise— in charge of it.

Nongovernmental organizations have taken on prominent roles in delivering environmental services in cities. The urban tree canopy is one of the major urban environmental campaigns of the last decade, as dozens of cities around the world have implemented tree planting initiatives designed to increase their tree canopies. These initiatives became the predominant urban strategy for using green infrastructure, or land and water resources, as a climate adaptation strategy (Amati & Taylor, 2010; Young, 2011). Trees contribute to green infrastructure in a myriad of ways: they enhance air, water, and soil quality; mitigate water flows and surface temperatures; protect habitats; and provide a host of recreational, psychological, and real estate benefits (Dwyer, Nowak, & Noble, 2003). However, empirical increases in urban tree

cover are negligible, and the increases that have occurred have largely followed rises in real estate values, raising questions about equity (Schwarz et al., 2015). This strong rhetoric paired with weak follow through echoes the advances in urban climate governance more broadly (Bierbaum et al., 2013; Kates, Travis, & Wilbanks, 2012).

Nongovernmental organizations have become major players in operationalizing these campaigns. This heavy reliance on civic partnerships has been due to a lack of financial incentives for private firms and perceived self-interested involvement of civic stewards (Agrawal, 2005). The topical focus on civic leadership through partnership-led governance is a common theme of climate governance more generally. Environmental scholars have largely examined these and other climate adaptation campaigns on their own terms. This work produces an excellent body of work about the internal organizational characteristics fostering environmental stewardship (c.f. Fisher, Campbell, & Svendsen, 2012, Svendsen & Campbell, 2008). However, this orientation has focused on social networks as largely independent of, and isolated from, broader trajectories of urban change. However, many criticize this networked governance precisely because it underfunds public welfare services (which include green infrastructure), while overly emphasizing revenue-generating activities (Harvey, 1989; Perkins, Heynen, & Wilson, 2004). Prominent environmental governance and climate adaptation scholars have called for this work to address urban development trends in a much more forceful and explicit way (Agrawal, 2010; Leichenko, 2011).

In this study, I critically examine the network structure and functioning of public-civic partnerships through an ethnography of the

public policy processes surrounding urban tree initiatives of Boston, Philadelphia, and Baltimore. My goal is to understand the rising prominence of NGOs in environmental service delivery as a model of urban governance. I conclude that networked governance succeeds in drawing diverse resources into its campaigns, but it tends to lack adequate hierarchy and centralization to drive these campaigns in a streamlined manner. It also highlights important questions of democratic representation and accountability in urban governance. The following sections introduce the role of public-civic partnerships in urban environmental governance and offer ways of evaluating the performance of partnership-driven governance.

2. Partnerships in urban governance

The importance of partnerships to neoliberal urban governance is well-known and arguably overstudied, but the vast majority of studies have focused on collaborations between private firms and public agencies in urban development projects. In the realm of urban sustainability and climate adaptation, nongovernmental organizations have become essential to the delivery of urban environmental services. Civic leadership is assumed, however many criticize the overemphasis on civic volunteerism as an inadequate substitute for public sector leadership. The public administration literature shows how to study public-civic partnerships analytically to determine how effective they are in driving urban environmental governance.

2.1. Public-civic partnerships in urban environmental governance

In the realm of environmental services, public-private partnerships undercut the work of public agencies by gutting city budgets and orienting political agendas around revenue-generating activities (Harvey, 1989). A longstanding concern is the actual ability of state regimes to ensure accountability and enforce regulations (Jessop, 2008). Environmental ramifications of public-private partnerships include the defunding of critical urban green infrastructure, unevenly distributed environmental amenities, private land grabbing of public parcels, and compromised pollution regulation. One study of urban tree initiatives in eight American cities concluded that adequate, secure long-term financing and political support were major barriers. With few exceptions, green infrastructure lacks access to traditional infrastructure financing in American cities, and it depends on creative, activist efforts for financial sustainability (Young, 2011).

Partnerships challenge the equitable provision of environmental services across metropolitan areas, as private firms often finance projects in areas with abundant parkland in close geographical proximity to their headquarters. Private actors effectively steer urban governance to benefit their interests. For example, the Hudson River Trust approached billionaire Barry Miller for financial assistance in repairing a dilapidated pier, and he successfully negotiated a proposal to develop a USD$250 million dollar park on a brand new island in the Hudson River. The park would include multiple features of limited public use; it would be located near other new high-value parks in Manhattan; and its maintenance would be turned over to city agencies after 15 years of operation (Lange, 2016). At the time of writing, New York City has remained embroiled in a heated public debate about whether to proceed with the project or shut it down (Baird-Remba, 2017).

The formal and informal regulations and norms around land sales of urban vacant land indicate another way that private firms with financial leverage drive land purchases. For example, in Detroit the privileging of revenue generation has encouraged public agencies to sell large-scale tracts of urban vacant land to private developers for commercial use rather than to civic organizations for a community land trust (Safransky, 2014).

The civic sector has not only managed the effects of public-private partnerships, but it has also actively partnered with public and private entities to govern the urban environment. Similar to Boston, many cities have used the popular appeal of trees to garner public support for tree planting initiatives. They position tree planting and stewardship as an activity accessible to the typical resident but that actively contributes to urban sustainability and climate adaptation. As government leadership, particularly at higher levels of government, stalls, tree planting is one way that an urban resident may reduce the urban heat island and even possibly contribute to carbon sequestration. The continual and expansive recruitment of lay volunteers has been crucial to these efforts.

Indeed, whereas public-private relationships have been the overwhelming focus of urban scholarship about collaborative governance, the civic sphere plays an instrumental role in the wide-reaching domains of environmental governance. A widely recognized model articulated by Lemos and Agrawal (2006) in the *Annual Review of Environment and Resources* creates three pillars of environmental governance: the public, private, and civic sectors. While public-private partnerships are well-known, the authors introduce two additional types of partnerships: (1) co-management refers to cooperation between the public and civic sector, in the form of community-based natural resource management or co-management of fisheries, forests, or water; (2) private-social partnerships refer to collaboration between the private and civic sectors, for example related to ecotourism or carbon sequestration. However, more empirical work is needed to evaluate whether additional resources brought in for collaborative governance increase environmental governance capacity or constrains it.

2.2. Ways of understanding partnerships

In the public administration literature, there are two predominant approaches for evaluating collaborative governance. Different approaches to the study of collaborative governance focus on network structure and network management. As the area of research has matured, scholars have branched out to incorporate multiple modes of evaluation (Cristofoli, Meneguzzo, & Riccucci, 2017). Critical to this development is a turn toward understanding the functioning of networks. Early studies, which revolved around network structure, emphasized the importance of centralization to network performance, rather than scattered relationships (Provan & Milward, 1995; Huang & Provan, 2007; Raab, Mannak, & Cambré, 2013). From a study of three mental health networks in three cities, Provan and Sebastian reinforce the importance of centralization. But they draw attention away from full network integration toward the "strongly connected and overlapping cliques of organizations" (1998:462).

However, an overemphasis on the forms of networks obscures the mechanisms through which they operate. This limitation sparked the evolution of a new set of studies emphasizing modes of management. These initially emphasized the role of the manager (c.f. Agranoff & McGuire, 2001) and have since turned toward the managerial strategies structuring interaction and establishing rules (e.g. Steijn, Klijn, & Edelenbos, 2011). Klijn et al. identify four types of key management strategies: (1) exploring - searching for goal congruency, gathering and managing data, and brainstorming different solutions; (2) arranging - creating organizational forms; (3) connecting - selectively activating actors, mobilizing resources, and mediating among actors; and (4) processing - setting rules for entering into or exiting from the network and rules for behavior within the network (2010). Studies of network management shed light on the ways in which formal rules and norms influence network performance, although informal rules and norms also play a significant supportive role. A third group of network studies focuses on the role of trust in fostering goodwill and cooperation among network participants (Sørensen & Torfing, 2009; Edelenbos & Klijn, 2007).

This work dovetails with extensive scholarship on social capital. In the context of urban development, social capital scholarship emphasizes the ways in which the success of formal legislation depends on the complicity, support, and acceptance of civil society (Coleman, 1990). There is a synergy between the activities of state agencies and civic