Bottom-up perspectives on nature conservation systems: The differences between regional and local administrations

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ABSTRACT

Many proposals to improve biodiversity governance target the stage of policy formulation. In this paper we highlight the importance of the subsequent policy realization stage, which is mostly carried out by sub-national administrative levels. We explore the differences in the opinions of practitioners representing regional and local public institutions in conservation policy design and implementation. The research was conducted through surveying a representative sample of local and regional practitioners within Małopolska, Poland. The results illustrate a cross-level mismatch between the regional and local practitioners. That is, practitioners operating at different administrative levels have significantly different opinions on nature conservation system performance, system effectiveness, the distribution of power among actors, and on the allocation of costs and benefits stemming from nature conservation. Local level representatives are generally more pleased with overall nature conservation performance and its outcomes, while regional level representatives are more skeptical, especially toward local level performance and the overall effectiveness of nature conservation. Also, local level respondents are more critical, while regional practitioners hold more positive images of the procedures involved during policy implementation. We highlight the practical implications of this kind of research, and the importance of quantitative data in evaluating the overall performance of conservation policy.

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1. Introduction

Coping with biodiversity threats and other kinds of challenges related to nature conservation implies a need to adjust both policy design and governance architecture to enhance effectiveness of institutional responses to those needs (Biermann et al., 2009). Designing environmental policy and shaping environmental governance in accordance with socio-ecological needs but also formulating normative and socially accepted responses are among the biggest challenges faced by environmental scientists and policy-makers (Hill et al., 2012). Many solutions have been proposed in the scientific literature to meet this challenge, for example: in-depth cooperation of ecologists and sociologists (Levin, 2006); application of interdisciplinary frameworks of the research (Adger et al., 2003); cross-disciplinary research improvement (Evely et al., 2010); communication of scientific results to the policy makers and general public (Dearing et al., 2012); social and institutional innovation in science-policy interface (van den Hove et al., 2012); multi-level decision making or the public participatory approach (Mannigel, 2008; Jones-Walters and

Çil, 2011; Young et al., 2013), or bridging the research–implementation gap in conservation planning (Knight et al., 2008). Also, to better understand the system of biodiversity (or natural resources) governance the widest possible range of actors, institutions, aspects and relations should be taken into consideration. This means going beyond the analysis of governance framework (encompassing policy design focused on a general goal) toward acknowledging the importance of governance regimes (including norms, rules and social contexts) (Paavola et al., 2009).

However, most of the above mentioned solutions mainly target the stage of policy design – i.e., the formulation of policy and of legal provisions or executive legal records, or the development of implementation procedures. For the most part, this stage takes place at the national level, often stemming from international agreements or commitments to international organizations. However, practical policy realization actually takes place at sub-national administrative levels. Thus, the challenge for effective conservation policy performance relies at a general level on policy design, administrative structure and existing procedures, but to a large extent practically depends on actions undertaken (or neglected) by actual 'policy-executors' – individuals formally bearing some responsibility of policy realization. The activity of those actors who are charged with the realization of conservation policy is shaped by legislation, their formal organizational responsibilities and capabilities, and by their social and personal characteristics. Characteristics such as educational and institutional background, personal values, social norms, and their experiences of or attitudes toward conservation influence their actions (Stoll-Kleeman, 2001; Dietz et al., 2003; Fischer and Young, 2007; Paavola et al., 2009; Cent et al., 2013).

A considerable number of studies have been devoted to the understanding of the social and personal characteristics influencing biodiversity protection among local residents or landowners (Bonaiuto et al., 2002; Primmer and Karppinen, 2010; Pietrzyk-Kaszyńska et al., 2012; Kamal et al., 2014). Recently, more studies have been published on the role of expert opinions and expert judgments in reference to environmental governance (Hagerman et al., 2010; Sandbrook et al., 2010; Decker and Bath, 2010; Hagerman and Satterfield, 2013). There are some signs of the importance of bureaucrats in successful environmental management (Sevä and Jagers, 2013), but there is still only limited attention given to the actual roles, actions, knowledge or opinions of policy executors, whereas a notion of street-level bureaucrats developed by Lipsky (1980) is relevant also for environmental governance. Policy executors' opinions and actions are of considerable importance as a bottom-up feedback on policy realization though, particularly with regard to multi-level governance (the situation when responsibilities over biodiversity are dispersed across scales and levels), and need to be explicitly considered. Also, having in mind the international and national efforts to enhance multi-level governance the need of information flow across levels is particularly meaningful in governance realization and evaluation (Koontz and Newig, 2014).

In this paper we postulate that information on how policy-executors and practitioners involved in biodiversity governance at various administrative levels perceive nature conservation system performance, and evaluate its various aspects, is an essential form of knowledge needed to assess the effectiveness of conservation policy. This is particularly important when lack of comprehensive data on ecological conditions is a common challenge (Balram et al., 2004; Lawrence and Turnhout, 2010), and there are many other spheres of uncertainty within environmental governance such as unpredicted changes in the natural environment or emerging social conflicts (Brugnach et al., 2008) that could benefit from this approach. These kinds of knowledge deficits can be partly offset by seeking the opinions of experts, practitioners and administrative representatives (Cook and Hockings, 2011).

In the context of policy implementation, administration has a particularly important role (Hubo and Krott, 2013). As formulated by Lipsky (1980) personal characteristics, day-to-day observations and experiences or established routine of people working in public institutions actually form public policy and constitute its internal part. Furthermore, administrative employees possess a particular knowledge on policy realization stemming from their expertise and experience. As defined by Maiello et al. (2013) *'administrative knowledge is a specific type of explicit knowledge, related to implicit beliefs'*, so in a way it is a mix of expert and lay knowledge as it is based on formal procedures and scientific beliefs but at the same time it is integrated with local reality. Local context is widely acknowledged as important in policy realization, a clear example of which is the principle of subsidiarity particularly invoked in the Treaty on European Union, but the role and power it should be given is constantly under debate (e.g., Smith et al., 2009; Noss, 2010). Regardless of these concerns, local level stakeholders and in particular local authority representatives, officials and clerks have a very practical, day-to-day influence on the realization of environmental policy. While some information from local policy-executors can be acquired by a particular administrative unit through case study research or, sometimes, a content analysis of existing documents, a study using cross-level quantitative data will deliver much more insight into the actual sub-national performance of the nature conservation system.

We explored the above mentioned issues by conducting the research in Poland. The country has a dynamic recent history, becoming a democratic country in 1989 and joining the European Union in 2004, both of which triggered a whole range of social and institutional changes (Tickle and Clark, 2000; Kluvánková-Oravská et al., 2009; Cent et al., 2014). Important changes included environmental legislation which enabled stakeholders to be involved into decision-making (Börzel and Buzogány, 2010; Cent et al., 2013; Niedziałkowski et al., 2013). Even though, both in Poland and in other Central Eastern European (CEE) countries, influence of the EU on environmental governance is sometimes assessed as ambivalent (Börzel, 2010; Kutter and Trappmann, 2010) and very often as partial – as hierarchical, command and control mode of governance still remain visible in CEE countries (Kluvánková-Oravská et al., 2009).

Changes in environmental governance had many practical consequences, such as the implementation of the European Ecological Network, Natura 2000. In Poland and most of the