



Climate governance through partnerships: A study of 150 urban initiatives in China



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ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:
Governance
Partnerships
Climate change
Cities
China

ABSTRACT

Partnerships emerge as part of an environmental governance paradigm shift towards less hierarchical, more collaborative, and non-regulative steering arrangements. This paper examines the prevalence of partnerships in environmental governance on an urban level in a semi-authoritarian setting, by exploring climate initiatives in cities in China. The paper presents exploratory qualitative analysis of governance in urban China through analysis of a database of 150 climate initiatives in 15 cities, which are seen at the forefront of climate protection. The analysis suggests that climate partnerships are used as a governance strategy in China. Moreover, partnerships perform a range of essential governance functions, from rule-setting and provision of public infrastructure and services, to supporting technology development and low carbon demonstration projects. The results indicate that partnerships can facilitate local climate action by creating access to resources, such as information, technology, and funding, as well as contribute to introduction of emission reduction technology and new policy approaches. However, the inclusion of non-state actors in the formulation and delivery of climate mitigation projects redefines the lines of authority over public issues. This draws attention to two key governance challenges in the context of a comparatively state-controlled, top-down political system: skewed participation and lack of deliberative opportunities.

1. Introduction

These are tumultuous times in international climate change politics. The Trump administration has withdrawn the commitment of the United States to the carbon emission reduction agreement signed at the Paris Conference in 2015 (Hunt, 2017). Meanwhile, China is re-inventing its position on this global issue – from the nation that some described as “wrecking” the Copenhagen Conference of Parties (COP) in 2009 (Lynas, 2009), to a country donning the mantle of international climate mitigation leadership (Emmott & Bartunek, 2017; Hilton, 2016). While global political maneuvers continue, they no longer dominate the stage of global climate mitigation action. Policymakers and scholars have instead directed their attention towards the multiple responses produced by sub-national authorities, transnational organizations, private alliances and firms, grassroots movements, and individuals in their quests to address the climate change challenge (Hoffmann, 2011; Bulkeley et al., 2014).

New possibilities for action have emerged since the turn to informal, experimental and voluntary approaches to climate change governance, and through the formation of networks of actors that operate across

geographical scales and administrative borders (Bulkeley et al., 2014; Chan et al., 2015; Hoffmann, 2011; Bulkeley & Newell, 2015; Okereke et al., 2009). Through transnational networks, sub-national government authorities and other non-state actors have gained prominent roles in climate action, and have created opportunities to shape international policy discourses and mobilize resources across political levels and boundaries (Kern & Bulkeley, 2009; Toly, 2008).

Partnerships are a governance strategy associated with networks. Sustainability partnerships are “collaborative arrangements in which actors from two or more spheres of society (state, market and civil society) are involved in a non-hierarchical process through which these actors strive for a sustainability goal” (Glasbergen et al., 2007, p. 2). Sustainability governance through partnerships is a pervasive phenomenon (Backstrand et al., 2010; Bulkeley & Castán Broto, 2012; Castán Broto & Bulkeley, 2013; Glasbergen et al., 2007; Huijstee et al., 2007; Pattberg et al., 2012). Yet, there is a need to understand how governance through partnerships influences the delivery of sub-national action for climate change. What kind of partnerships govern climate change? How, specifically, do partnerships contribute to local climate mitigation action?

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<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.gloenvcha.2018.04.008>

Received 22 June 2017; Received in revised form 9 November 2017; Accepted 2 April 2018
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We examine this question in the context of climate mitigation action in China - a nation that has adopted ambitious low carbon development targets. China's Intended Nationally Determined Contributions (INDC) aim for carbon dioxide emissions to peak by 2030, carbon dioxide emission intensity to be lowered by 60% to 65% from the level in 2005, and the share of non-fossil fuels in the energy mix to increase to 20% (NDRC, 2015). These goals must to a large extent be implemented locally, especially on a municipal level. By 2030, China's urban population is expected to increase to around one billion, making up 70% of the national total (World Bank, 2014). Urban regions in China also account for a large share of energy use and energy-related carbon dioxide emissions (Baeumlner et al., 2012; Dhakal et al., 2011; Oshita et al., 2015). By introducing a low carbon pilot province and cities program (NDRC, 2013), the central government has placed municipal and provincial authorities at the forefront of experimentation in climate policy.

At the same time, China's new environmental governance arrangements are shifting roles and responsibilities of public and non-state actors (Carter & Mol, 2013; Mol & Carter, 2006; Mol, 2009). Tangible changes include:

- 1) Increasing responsibility of local authorities for environmental protection and climate mitigation (Lo & Tang, 2006; Qi et al., 2008);
- 2) Increasing non-state actor participation in environmental policy (Francesch-Huidobro et al., 2012; Mai & Francesch-Huidobro & Meidan et al., 2009; Tsang & Kolk, 2010);
- 3) Contribution of the private sector to sustainable infrastructure (Tian, 2015; Zhong et al., 2008); and
- 4) Rising visibility of civil society in environmental affairs (Ho, 2007; Tang & Zhan, 2008; Zhan & Tang, 2013).

Partnerships may be an important part of these transformations, but their role has not previously been studied in detail. Thus, this paper analyses how urban climate partnerships emerge at the local scale in China, how they facilitate local climate action, and what trends in participation they foster.

The paper is organized as follows. Section 2 provides an overview of the literature on climate governance, with a focus on governance through partnerships. Section 3 discusses trends in climate governance in China, highlighting the emergence of cross-sector interaction and governance networks. Section 4 describes the methodology of the study. Section 5 presents the results, demonstrating a diversity of partnership constellations employed in urban climate governance. Section 6 discusses theoretical implications of the findings, in particular how partnerships as a collaborative governance mode can be understood in China's political system.

2. Climate governance through networks and partnerships

The concept of governance gained traction as nation-states were deemed to lose influence over interconnected, fragmented and globalized public policy issues (Rhodes, 1996; Rosenau, 1995). In this setting, governments sought to increase authority through sharing it horizontally (with non-governmental organizations) and vertically (which sub-national governmental or intergovernmental institutions) (Hooghe & Marks, 2001; Pierre, 2000; Pierre & Peters, 2000). Theories of governance networks provided workable alternatives to the failure of traditional hierarchal or market-based approaches to public issues in a dynamic and complex society (Kickert et al., 1997). This literature explains how public actors achieve collective goals through dialogue, negotiation, and collaboration with a diversity of inter-dependent organizations beyond the traditional public sphere (Sorensen & Torfing, 2007; Torfing et al., 2012).

In environmental politics, the rise of partnerships emerged as part of a governance paradigm based on less hierarchical and more collaborative, deliberative, and inclusive steering arrangements (Backstrand et al., 2010). An emphasis on deliberation has been central to

environmental policy since at least the 1992 United Nations (UN) Conference on Environment and Development (Earth Summit) (Glasbergen et al., 2007), and this emphasis is reproduced in the Sustainable Development Goals (UNSD, 2015). SDG17 ("Revitalize the global partnership for sustainable development") represents a firm commitment to partnerships as a strategy to implement sustainability action. Nevertheless, this conceptualization remains centered on traditional forms of governance based upon formal institutions and top-down control. A realization since the debacle in the 2009 Conference of Parties in Copenhagen (see Hoffman, 2011) is that partnerships create opportunities for performing agency and authority outside formal institutions. Glasbergen et al., 2007 argues that governance through partnerships represents a fundamental shift towards pluralistic steering approaches where businesses and civil society not only are part of realizing predefined aims, but in formulating development goals. He argues that governance through partnerships is achieved through self-organizing capacities of societal actors and their collective commitment to resolving sustainability challenges. Sustainability partnerships exist in various forms, involving collaboration between companies, public authorities, NGOs, and research organizations, operating on a regional, national and global level (Huijstee et al., 2007). Sustainability partnerships also perform a variety of governance functions, ranging from rule making and standard setting to information dissemination, technology transfer and capacity building (Pattberg et al., 2012).

Climate mitigation presents new policy challenges and efforts to govern the climate often involve pursuit of material and policy innovation. Nation states have re-emerged as key actors in climate governance through a surge of activity directed towards developing novel climate policy instruments (Jordan & Huitema, 2014). Urban climate change governance is characterized by innovative measures and experimental processes, which open up new political spaces for intervention at the local level (Bulkeley & Castán Broto, 2012; Castán Broto & Bulkeley, 2013). Partnerships create opportunities for climate policy diffusion, as collaboration and cross-sector interaction can facilitate learning and adoption of new ideas and approaches (Bauer & Steurer, 2014).

The pursuit of collaborative and participatory forms of environmental governance generates a normative expectation that this will result in more democratic steering arrangements. Partnerships can accrue benefits such as consultation and dialogue, possibility to include otherwise marginalized voices, and filling participatory deficits (Glasbergen, 2011). For example, forming partnerships with communities can empower socially excluded groups and highlight issues of justice, while aligning agendas with local development priorities (Castán Broto et al., 2015a; Castán Broto et al., 2015b). However, such positive outcomes are not guaranteed (Backstrand et al., 2010). The transfer of influence over public issues to non-state actors can also be problematic from the perspective of democratic performance (Bogason & Musso, 2006; Pierre & Peters, 2010; Sorensen, 2002). For partnerships to meet criteria of legitimacy and accountability, they depend on achieving transparency and equal access to participation (Backstrand, 2008; Benner et al., 2004). For example, partnerships resulting from the World Summit on Sustainable Development (WSSD) displayed higher participation of actors from the global North and traditional actors, such as international institutions (Andonova & Levy, 2003; Pattberg & Stripple, 2008; see also Bitzer et al., 2008; Clapp, 1998; Dingwerth, 2008). In partnerships formed through transnational climate networks, government-led and private-private partnerships exhibit accountability deficits (Backstrand, 2008). Forsyth (2005) has argued that dominant players such as international institutions or large firms co-opt and exclude socially marginalized groups from partnerships. The benefits of partnerships can therefore not be taken for granted, either in terms of effectiveness in climate change action or increasing the room for social deliberation and participation.

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