



Constructing legitimacy for climate change planning: A study of local government in Denmark



Matthew Cashmore^a, Anja Wejs^{b,*}

^a Department of Development and Planning, Aalborg University, A.C. Meyers Vænge 15, DK-2450 Copenhagen, Denmark

^b Department of Development and Planning, Aalborg University, Skibbrogade 5, DK-9000 Aalborg, Denmark

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 24 January 2013

Received in revised form 23 September 2013

Accepted 29 September 2013

Keywords:

Climate change planning

Legitimacy

Local government

New institutional theory

Social change

ABSTRACT

Existing research on climate change planning has tended to adopt an overly simplistic approach to analyzing how agency and structure mediate local governments' responses to climate change. This research contributes to scientific capacity to predict and explain patterns of climate change planning by focusing on the concept of legitimacy and examining its influence upon the dialectic between structure and agency. A conceptual framework foregrounding legitimacy is developed based upon new institutional theory. An initiative to institutionalize climate change planning in Aarhus Municipality, Denmark, is used as a case study to validate four propositions derived from existing research but filtered through the conceptual framework. Validation of the propositions evidences a hierarchy in the salience of different forms of legitimacy, with moral and ethical arguments for undertaking climate change planning having limited social traction in Denmark in the absence of significant extreme climatic events. The analysis also generates thicker, more nuanced explanations for real-world patterns of climate change planning. The findings thereby provide a corrective to a number of assertions made in the literature, notably in relation to the role of agency in the institutionalization of climate change planning.

© 2013 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

1. Introduction

Within the literature, climate change mitigation and adaptation at the local level is increasingly portrayed as a new, discrete field of spatial planning research and practice (Bassett and Shandas, 2010; Measham et al., 2011; Meyer et al., 2010; Wheeler, 2008). Hurlimann and March (2012, p. 480) describe spatial planning as “a way of thinking and acting across spatial, temporal and governance scales while understanding and acting on local circumstances and particularities”. Spatial planning is recognized to have a potentially critical role to play in addressing climate change, particularly for adaptation given its ‘place bound’ nature (McDonald, 2011; Wilson, 2006). The emergence and rapid proliferation of climate change planning practice, as a form of spatial planning, has made local government a principal actor in addressing both the causes and consequences of climate change.

A division is sometimes maintained in research and practice between planning for mitigation and adaptation (Hurlimann and March, 2012). This is reflected, for example, in the practice of producing separate plans for mitigation and adaptation activities. This division is a consequence of historical developments, but is also rationalized on the basis that mitigation and adaptation

involve greatly differing temporal and spatial scales (Swart and Raes, 2007). Nevertheless, increasing attention has recently been given to the interrelations between mitigation and adaptation, for both planning theory and practice (Davoudi et al., 2009; Swart and Raes, 2007). Such work has emphasized the potential for realizing synergistic outcomes and avoiding undesirable trade-offs through the integrated consideration of mitigation and adaptation, at least in certain spatial planning contexts. In this article climate change planning is therefore interpreted as encompassing both mitigation and adaptation for we view a rigid dichotomy between these two concepts as practically unhelpful and theoretically unwarranted.

Whilst local government is at the vanguard of climate change planning, the existence of a multiplicity of practical barriers to developing co-ordinated and comprehensive plans and securing their subsequent implementation is well documented. Climate change planning constitutes an example par excellence of the importance, and conversely the challenges, of horizontal and vertical co-ordination (Betsill and Bulkeley, 2006; Bulkeley, 2010; Kern and Alber, 2009). Co-ordination is posited to be essential if undesirable trade-offs are to be avoided and potential synergies exploited (Barker et al., 2007; Biesbroek et al., 2009; Kok and de Coninck, 2007; Larsen et al., 2012), but as Peters (2010, p. 42) concludes, “[g]overnments have had difficulties in coordinating their activities [for] as long as there have been governments”.

Various researchers have emphasized the significance of formal and informal institutional rules, such as regulatory structures,

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +45 21737537.

E-mail addresses: wejs@plan.aau.dk, anja_wejs@hotmail.com (A. Wejs).

property rights and socio-cultural norms, as barriers to co-ordinated climate change planning (e.g. [Adger et al., 2005](#); [Næss et al., 2005](#)). It has also been observed that within local government climate change expertise often remains concentrated in environmental departments, which tend to be somewhat marginalized within the organizational hierarchy of local government, plus have limited capacity to implement planning policy ([Kern and Alber, 2009](#)). Resource limitations may also constrain climate change planning activities (e.g. [Bulkeley and Kern, 2006](#); [Holgate, 2007](#)).

This article builds on previous research on the governance of climate change (e.g. [Bulkeley and Kern, 2006](#); [Jordan et al., 2012](#)) through a detailed examination of the situated institutionalization of this emerging field in local government. The research focuses, in particular, on the issue of legitimacy and explores its relevance to understanding societal change drawing on a perspective based in new institutional theory. Empirically, we study how the construction of legitimacy for climate change planning affects and is affected by the interplay between structure and agency, and how this in turn affects patterns of its institutionalization.

The concept of legitimacy is variously interpreted within the literature; indeed, a frequent problem in research on this subject is that how legitimacy is understood is not adequately explicated ([Parkinson, 2003](#)). [Adger et al. \(2005, p. 83\)](#) suggest that in relation to decision making, legitimacy concerns, “the extent to which decisions are acceptable to participants and non-participants”, noting also that “[l]egitimacy can be gained as well as compromised through the evolution of [climate change] adaptation strategies”. In this research we draw on a broader definition in which legitimacy is interpreted as, “a generalized perception or assumption that the actions of an entity are desirable, proper, or appropriate within some socially constructed system of norms, values, beliefs, and definitions” ([Suchman, 2005, p. 574](#)). We therefore critically examine how climate change planning is constructed as desirable, proper or appropriate (i.e. legitimized) in a particular context.

The research is based on a premise that in local government, where multiple issues compete for attention, co-ordination is typically problematic and resources are limited, legitimacy is a prerequisite for climate change planning to be prioritized and for plans to be acted upon. Furthermore, legitimacy is a particularly critical issue for climate change planning given that oftentimes there are few or no regulatory requirements for it to take place. In practical terms, this means that if climate change planning is not perceived as legitimate, it is unlikely that it will be prioritized, although we note that legitimacy on its own might not be sufficient to guarantee action. There is hence likely to be a ‘legitimacy gap’ – a deficit that must be actively bridged through actions to create or enhance legitimacy – if it is to be prioritized ([Connelly et al., 2006](#)).

Empirically, the research focuses on Denmark, a Scandinavian country in the northern part of Europe. Denmark has experienced various impacts thought to be attributable in part to climate change ([Olesen et al., 2012](#)). Denmark was also the geographical centre for recent discussions on international climate policy, most importantly the COP 15 in December 2009, which undoubtedly raised the profile of the issue nationally. Within this context, 74 out of 98 Danish local government organizations have made voluntary commitments to reduce carbon emissions ([Danish Society for Nature Conservation, 2012](#)), and more than 40 have produced publicly accessible climate change plans ([Wejs, 2013](#)). In this research we focus on a single local government organization, Aarhus municipality in Jutland.

Having introduced the main aim of the article, the remainder unfolds as follows. Firstly, a conceptual framework for legitimacy is developed based upon a new institutional theoretical perspective. Secondly, the research design and methodology are succinctly described. As part of this, four propositions developed jointly from

the research literature and the conceptual framework are outlined. Thirdly, the propositions are empirically tested using data from the Aarhus case. The article concludes with a discussion of the main contributions of this research.

2. Theoretical and conceptual positioning

2.1. Legitimacy for institutional change

This research is based on the assumption that the waxing and waning of the legitimacy of extant institutions, and attempts to construct legitimacy for either new institutions or the reinterpretation of existing ones, are important in explaining patterns of climate change planning in local government. Our theoretical approach to this subject is grounded in new institutional theory, wherein an institution is interpreted as, “organized patterns of socially constructed norms and roles, and socially prescribed behaviours expected of those roles, which are created and re-created over time” ([Goodin, 1996, p. 19](#)). As this definition implies, new institutionalism is concerned with the duality of institutions: that is, that they are, at one and the same time, constitutive of social order and social products ([Lowdes, 2002](#); [Sewell, 1992](#)).

The concept of legitimacy is important to new institutional theory because an institution (new or extant) must be viewed as legitimate if it is to be reproduced ([Connelly et al., 2006](#); [Human and Provan, 2000](#)), other than where violence or physical coercion is involved. The process whereby a social actor willingly reproduces an institution is referred to as ‘confirm structuring’ by [Haugaard \(2003\)](#). Maintenance of the status quo in institutional terms is premised on actors continuing to confirm structure extant institutions, in part because either they are seen as legitimate or their legitimacy is taken for granted.

Our interpretation of new institutionalism is based on a belief that structure and agency are co-produced and hence, “[institutional] change never starts because it never stops” ([Weick and Quinn, 1999](#)). The institutionalization of climate change planning is considered to involve changes in the structural status quo in which it acquires formal or informal rule like properties. Institutionalization of climate change planning is hence analogous to institutional change in the context of this research. [Mahoney and Thelen \(2010\)](#) note that institutional change occurs not only as a consequence of the introduction of new rules. Change can be a consequence of the revised enactment of an existing institution in the ‘soft spaces’ that exist between institutions and their interpretation and enforcement. The discretion held by actors in the interpretation and implementation of an institution, therefore, is an important source of institutional mutability.

[Scott \(2008\)](#) identifies a number of sources from which an institution may derive legitimacy under his tripartite categorization of ‘pillars’ of new institutionalism (see [Table 1](#)). We use Scott’s three pillars (regulative, normative and cultural-cognitive) in this research as the basis for categorizing institutions and legitimacy. A pillar under Scott’s framework is thus analogous to a category of institutions, or the formal or informal rules guiding action in a particular context. Each category of institutions is founded upon a particular form of legitimacy.

Under the regulative pillar, legitimacy is related to a belief in following explicit rules, notably the rule of law ([Scott et al., 2000](#)). The official or legal status of an institution combined with the threat of sanctions if it is not confirmed structured are constitutive of legitimacy in such circumstances. As previously mentioned, climate change planning oftentimes is conducted voluntarily and so legitimacy related to regulatory institutions would be expected to be less important than is the case for many other fields of spatial planning where practices are more extensively codified. Nevertheless, it is conceivable that legitimacy for new practices

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/7470682>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/7470682>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)