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Community Governance and Citizen-Driven Initiatives in Climate Change Mitigation: An Introduction

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Published in:
Community Governance and Citizen Driven Initiatives in Climate Change Mitigation

Publication date:
2016

Document version
Version created as part of publication process; publisher's layout; not normally made publicly available

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1 Community governance and citizen-driven initiatives in climate change mitigation

An introduction

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Introduction

Global warming is one of the greatest challenges faced by humanity today. The international community is still hoping to limit global warming to no more than 2°C as compared to pre-industrial levels, and the scenario proposed in 2014 by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC, established under the auspices of the United Nations) requires reducing global carbon dioxide (CO_2) emissions by 41 to 72 per cent by 2050 as compared to 2010 (IPCC 2014, 23). This objective requires no less than a drastic transformation of the way we produce energy and goods.

The traditional emphasis in the field of climate change mitigation has been on the technical and infrastructural aspects of such a transformation. Thus, mitigation policies have been concerned with the transformation of energy systems towards renewable energy, improving energy efficiency and trading CO_2 quotas. Yet, even though benefits from this transformation are now becoming visible, CO_2 emissions continue to grow at a rate that is higher than ever (IPCC 2014). Because the changes in energy systems do not seem to be enough to keep global warming under the stated goal of 2°C, attention is now increasingly directed towards effecting changes in individual behaviour to reduce people's carbon footprints.

This emphasis upon individual behaviour poses an enormous political and social challenge. Curbing consumption goes against many values we take for granted, such as the idea that our well-being depends on an ever-increasing consumption of goods, as if there were no limits to growth. Curbing consumption also faces widespread scepticism about its effect on individual consumption, coupled with a 'tragedy of the commons', in which no individual feels personally responsible for securing the sound management of collective goods, and in which individuals do not want to be the first to change behaviour.

In addition, this stress on individual behaviour also poses serious ethical and political challenges regarding the environmental legitimacy of political action and the best strategies to encourage sounder environmental behaviour. Overall, the problem we face today is not due to a lack of adequate technology to mitigate climate change; it is a general reluctance to apply these technologies, and in

2   *Hoff and Gausset*

so doing, to bear the social, political as well as financial costs. The challenge of climate change mitigation is therefore, first of all, a problem of governance.

The basic tenet of this book is that citizens, as individuals or as parts of smaller or bigger communities, can and must play an important part in the efforts to mitigate climate changes. Indeed, 'we, the people', as victims of climate change, are also the ones who can act on this immanent threat. This role of citizens as *active agents* in climate change mitigation was brought to the foreground of climate change mitigation efforts following the failure of the international community to reach significant global agreements on the reduction of greenhouse gas emissions. This inability of global institutions to grapple with the issue collectively has left the challenge on our doorstep. This book is about how this challenge has been embraced by both citizens and local communities.

We argue that the disillusionment about the failure to reach global environmental agreements, especially after the 2009 United Nations Conference of the Parties 15 (COP 15) summit in Copenhagen, led local governments, policy makers, environmental organisations and 'green' movements as well as citizens themselves to focus on local possibilities for action on climate change. This 'reorientation towards the local' is the framework within which this book is written.

This book takes different case studies as points of departure in order to answer the following questions: How and why do citizens become engaged in climate change mitigation? What motivates citizens to take action, and what are the factors that hold them back or discourage them? What are the effects of this engagement on local communities and their organisational framework, on the broader political/democratic system and on citizens themselves?

The different chapters of this book approach these research questions from different theoretical and methodological perspectives, most of which come from the social sciences – sociology, anthropology and political science. Whilst we do not attempt to apply a unified theoretical perspective, we have been guided by a common, overall frame of reference. We focus on citizen initiatives, engagement and participation in climate change mitigation, but only insofar as these activities are embedded in a relationship between public agencies and citizens as individuals or as members of different types of communities, and only insofar as they attempt to influence people's behaviour. What we are interested in here is what some have called 'collaborative arrangements' (Healey 1997/2006), and others have called 'co-creation' (Joiner and Josephs 2007), in which citizens and public authorities can play bigger or smaller roles. Because such collaborative arrangements can be seen as governance technologies (Bang 2003), what we discuss in this book is therefore citizen engagement in climate change mitigation *as a governance technology* (Chapters 2 to 11). In some of these governance arrangements, artifacts such as websites or computer games play an important role in mediating the relationship between public agency and citizens, thereby becoming social software (see Chapters 12 and 13).

This way of approaching the subject has important implications for both how we define citizen participation in climate change mitigation (see Chapter 3), and

for the roles that citizen initiatives and green movements play in this book. Thus, in the specific cases we analyse here, we only deal with organisations insofar as they engage in some form of collaboration/co-creation with local public agencies.

We use Figure 1.1 as a heuristic device to present the field of possible collaborative arrangements between local public agencies and citizens. The figure combines a vertical axis representing the initiation of climate change mitigation interventions with a horizontal axis representing the focus of these interventions. The vertical axis is presented as a continuum and shows that interventions can be initiated either by government agents or by citizens, but most often in a collaboration in which one of the two poles weighs more than the other. As noted above, there is always an element of involvement of local authority and local citizen participation in our case studies, however minor the contribution of either party might be.

The horizontal axis of the figure, also presented as a continuum, shows that interventions can target either individual change (consumption patterns, transport habits) or collective changes (creation of a low-energy housing cooperative, a sustainable village, building of new collective infrastructures). Since collective change requires the participation of a large number of individuals, and since individuals are influenced by collective behaviour, most interventions mix both aspects, to various degrees.

The figure contains four squares (1–4); we deliberately sought out cases that illustrate each of the squares. Our underlying idea is to investigate whether projects and initiatives belonging to one of these squares might be consistently better than those belonging to other squares in engaging citizens and having measurable effects on the reduction of CO_2 emissions.

Square 1 of the figure denotes arrangements/projects that are clearly initiated by a public agency, and are focused primarily on influencing individual behaviour. These arrangements rely most often on policies influenced by rational
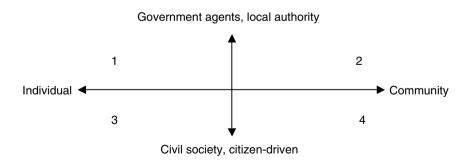

Figure 1.1 The field of possible collaborative arrangements concerning climate change mitigation. Vertical axis represents the initiation of intervention and horizontal axis represents the focus of intervention

choice theory, which posits that individuals will always choose the most rational options that maximise their advantages. The type of policies that this approach entails focuses on providing the right information to actors and influencing behaviour mainly through economic (dis)incentives. Information campaigns, taxes or subsidies are therefore the most common social technologies found among these arrangements. Examples of such arrangements are found in Chapter 2, which discusses different types of CO_2 calculators, in Chapter 4, which discusses a municipal 'climate family' project, in Chapter 11, which discusses recycling routines and resource flows and in Chapter 13, which discusses computer games as a possible tool for facilitating climate change mitigation.

Square 2 of the figure denotes arrangements initiated by a public agency that focus on different types of communities where the changes promoted require the support of a collectivity, or at least of a certain number of participants. Well-known examples of collective arrangements include environmental impact assessments relating to projects such as construction of wind turbines, national parks and power plants that impact landscapes or a neighbourhood. Examples of such arrangements are found in Chapter 8 on energy transition in Wolfhagen, Germany, in Chapter 6 on different models of energy renovation of houses and in Chapter 12 on the use of a municipal website to engage different local communities in climate change mitigation.

Square 3 of the figure denotes action initiated specifically by citizens themselves as individual actors. Citizens may reflect on and take action to mitigate climate change in their homes, at work, while shopping and transporting themselves and in numerous other ways. Many such daily choices are not made in response to temporary external interventions, but are based on the total knowledge, norms and values internalised by each individual throughout his/her life. Because individuals may try to save money at the same time as they try to conform to norms, respect legislation or be empathetic towards other living creatures, the motivations for such actions can be economic, social, legal and moral. Such individual actions can also depend on a number of socio-economic factors such as gender, age, income, education, values and political orientation, as discussed in Chapter 5 on environmental choices in everyday life.

Square 4 of the figure denotes arrangements/projects where the initiative comes from citizens or groups of citizens and are typically aimed at improving their local community or association. Arrangements in this square include, *inter alia*, food cooperatives, sustainable food clubs, carbon-neutral building blocks, communities or villages and sustainable islands. An example of the development of a low-energy neighbourhood is discussed in Chapter 6.

These four possibilities, which are arranged to illustrate both bottom-up/top-down agency and individual/collective targets, should be seen as ideal types. In practice, the two axes present themselves as continua, with most initiatives or projects situated somewhere in between the four extremes.

On the vertical axis, for example, even though local governments often take the initiative to launch environmental projects, they might do so under the pressure of public opinion, with the support of local politicians who wish to be

re-elected in their constituency. Likewise, when citizens take the initiative to improve the local environment or reduce their carbon footprint, it is often diffi-cult to distinguish between how much of this initiative responds (even if in part) to governmental stimuli such as information campaigns or economic incentives.

On the horizontal axis, even though collectivities are more than the sum of the individuals who constitute them, it is nevertheless through the actions of individuals that collectivities change. Inversely, individuals are social beings who have been socialised and are constantly influenced by others within a broader collectivity. Individuals and collectivities co-constitute each other, just as local government action and citizen initiatives are closely connected.

One of the lessons drawn from the studies presented in this book is that the traditional approach to influencing environmental behaviour, found in Square 1 and epitomised by information campaigns and economic incentives, cannot trig-ger the broad and deep behavioural changes required to reduce a sufficient amount of CO_2. Of course, it is easier for policy makers to work with individuals through the media or by taxation, but there is a limit to how much can be achieved this way, and there is an urgent need to complement approaches that focus on individuals with projects that target social groups and collectivities more explicitly. As discussed in Chapters 5 and 6, individuals who respond to information campaigns or economic subsidies are often those who already have a high environmental consciousness and are often relatively well-off. Thus, the 'additionality' of such campaigns (the extent to which they trigger changes that would otherwise not have happened had the project not taken place) needs to be questioned.

Several of our studies suggest that reaching sceptics will not be possible unless moral norms and values are changed, which would require a strong collective approach to environmental problems. People who do not want to change their behaviour to save money or for the sake of the environment are likely to recon-sider their position once sound environmental behaviour becomes a dominant social norm. The multiplication of local collective projects that build on strong local commitments might reach a certain threshold and create new behavioural and consumption standards in the broader society, which, in turn, will trigger new legislation and political standards.

We come to a second lesson drawn from the present studies, namely that the engagement of citizens and their collaboration or interplay with various levels of government authority is crucial to addressing global warming successfully. Without citizen initiatives, political action is weaker, not only because it is less ambitious, but also because it appears be less legitimate politically. Opinion surveys show that a majority of people support more environmental political actions (see Chapter 5). And yet, politicians continue to be hesitant about making bold decisions.

Therefore, local projects that mobilise different groups of citizens around common values can help trigger stronger environmental legislation. This is beginning to be understood in an increasing number of municipalities that are now trying new ways to encourage the emergence of local environmental

6   *Hoff and Gausset*

associations. It is clear that the collaboration between local initiatives and municipal governments (and from there, higher levels of governments) is one of the keys to reducing the carbon footprint of our societies.

Traditional approaches to climate change mitigation are often driven from above and focus on individuals. This book suggests that new approaches be applied to climate change mitigation projects that emphasise the interplay between public agents and citizens and harness the full potential of working with social groups, collectivities and networks. Only then will we be able to trigger widespread behaviour change to mitigate climate change.

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