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BLOG: Legitimacy in a complex world

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Leading researchers met at the European University Institute to discuss the changing role of legitimacy in polycentric climate governance

Fariborz Zelli (Lund University), Karin Bäckstrand (Stockholm University) and Philip Schleifer (University of Amsterdam)

The growing complexity and polycentric nature of climate governance raises pressing questions about its legitimacy. Increasingly, climate governance crosses levels of analysis and involves public and private actors in a multitude of ways and institutional forums, calling into question traditional concepts and theories. Because of the on-going and fast-paced change in this and other areas, it is less clear than ever what the sociological and normative foundations of political legitimacy are. However, a clear understanding of how legitimate climate governance could look like, how it can be generated and maintained is central to a successful policy agenda.

To advance research on this important topic, INOGOV funded an international expert workshop on “Enhancing Legitimacy in Polycentric Climate Governance” on 19-20 May. The workshop was hosted by the European University Institute’s Robert Schuman Centre for Advanced Studies and took place in Villa Schifanoia in Florence. Co-hosting institutions were the political science departments of Lund University and Stockholm University.

Workshop organisers Fariborz Zelli, Karin Bäckstrand and Philip Schleifer welcomed over 20 scholars from 10 countries who contributed innovative papers and engaged in a first systematic and comprehensive analysis of legitimacy in an increasingly complex climate governance landscape. Participants included among others Robert Keohane, Liliana Andonova, Peter Haas and Steven Bernstein.

In his keynote address, Robert Keohane set the scene and outlined the broader research agenda on legitimacy in global climate governance. The workshop then continued along three sessions: (1) addressing dimensions of legitimacy in polycentric climate governance; (2) causes and consequences of legitimacy in this institutional complexity; (3) and new directions for researching legitimacy to account for this changing context.

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In the first session, "Taking Stock", participants unpacked different concepts and understandings of legitimacy and how these relate to the emerging polycentricity of climate governance. This included the dichotomy between normative and sociological legitimacy, i.e. the distinction whether some form of rule can be determined as legitimate based on stipulated normative criteria or whether it is perceived or believed to be legitimate. One core argument emerging from this discussion was that the emerging institutional complex on climate change creates a cross-institutional context of normative legitimacy: the individual institutions have to justify their decisions not only within their own governance domains but in the entire realm of climate governance.

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Another important theme was the contrast between input and output legitimacy, i.e. assessing legitimacy based on procedural values (e.g. transparency, accountability and participation) or based on policy impact (e.g. distributive justice, performance and effectiveness). In her session keynote, Liliana Andonova, targeted the input level, examining the different procedures, interest networks and power constellations that lead to the emergence of the institutional complex on clean energy. Harro van Asselt and Sander Chan, by contrast, scrutinised the output dimension of legitimacy with their study on the performance of transnational climate initiatives from the perspective of the Global South. Other questions discussed in this first session were the scope of legitimacy in a polycentric governance architecture (from individual institutions to institutional complexes), the sectoral focus (from specific issue areas like REDD+ or renewable energy to climate governance as a whole), levels and audiences of legitimacy.

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The main topics of Session 2 on "Sources and Consequences" were strategies of legitimation or delegitimation and conflicting legitimacies. In his session keynote, Peter Haas addressed potential limits to the legitimation of epistemic institutions like the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change. He observed that scientists and those who design science-based institutions face several tensions, since they have to satisfy the legitimacy expectations of multiple and possibly competing audiences. In a similar vein, scholars analyzed conflicting legitimacies between institutions, such as tensions between the United Nations climate regime and the International Civil Aviation Organization. In addition, the discussions focused on potential sources of legitimacy for specific elements of polycentric climate governance. One contribution identified public opinion as an essential source of legitimacy, conducting a survey experiment on two private governance initiatives, the International Standards Organization (ISO) and the Forest Stewardship Council (FSC). Another key question in this session were the consequences of polycentricity for the legitimacy of individual institutions or an entire institutional complex. In particular, the discussion evolved around the changing role of the secretariat of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC). In a similar vein, the efforts of the UNFCCC's Standing Committee on Finance to improve coherence and coordination in the delivery of climate finance across the polycentric governance system were scrutinized.

The third and final session brought together papers and discussions about new normative directions for the research on legitimacy in a complex governance landscape. One major question here was to what extent polycentricity should be promoted. Emily Boyd and Sirkku Juhola explored this question for the governance of adaptation to climate change. They called for active engagement by local, regional and national stakeholders through a new set of small and medium-sized institutions.

Another topic regarded innovative ways to enhance legitimacy. In her session keynote, Karin Bäckstrand scrutinised how orchestration in the UNFCCC can be made more democratically legitimate. Similarly, David Gordon, Steven Bernstein and Matthew Hoffmann addressed the shifting nature of accountability for alternative arrangements. They directed their analysis towards the increased amount, reach, and scope of urban climate governance, and the rise of novel practices of disclosure and reporting by cities. They drew attention to the evolution of cross-institutional spaces, as they may offer cities a means of securing global legitimacy and recognition from important external audiences and of gaining access to sources of finance and technical assistance.

Across these three sessions, participants flagged a number of overarching questions that merit further scholarly focus. One was whether legitimacy is actually a desirable concept in a polycentric architecture, or whether polycentricity reinforces trade-offs between legitimacy and effectiveness. A more radical concern was whether we, as scholars or practitioners, can do something at all. Is it possible to induce sensible responses to improve legitimacy in light of the many unintended consequences that a complex system may entail? Finally, all participants agreed on the need for innovative theoretical and methodological approaches that do justice to the changing character of legitimacy, its sources and its consequences in an increasingly complex institutional environment. The workshop demonstrated the great relevance and potential of the emerging research programme on legitimacy in polycentricity. As one proceeding of this successful workshop, the organisers will review the state of the art in detail for a book chapter for the INOGOV synthesis volume *Governing Climate Change: Polycentricity in Action* (Cambridge University Press, forthcoming 2018).

Photo credit: Workshop organisers

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