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Report Part Title: Multilevel Governance Theory

Report Title: Theories and Methods for the Study of Multilevel Environmental
Governance
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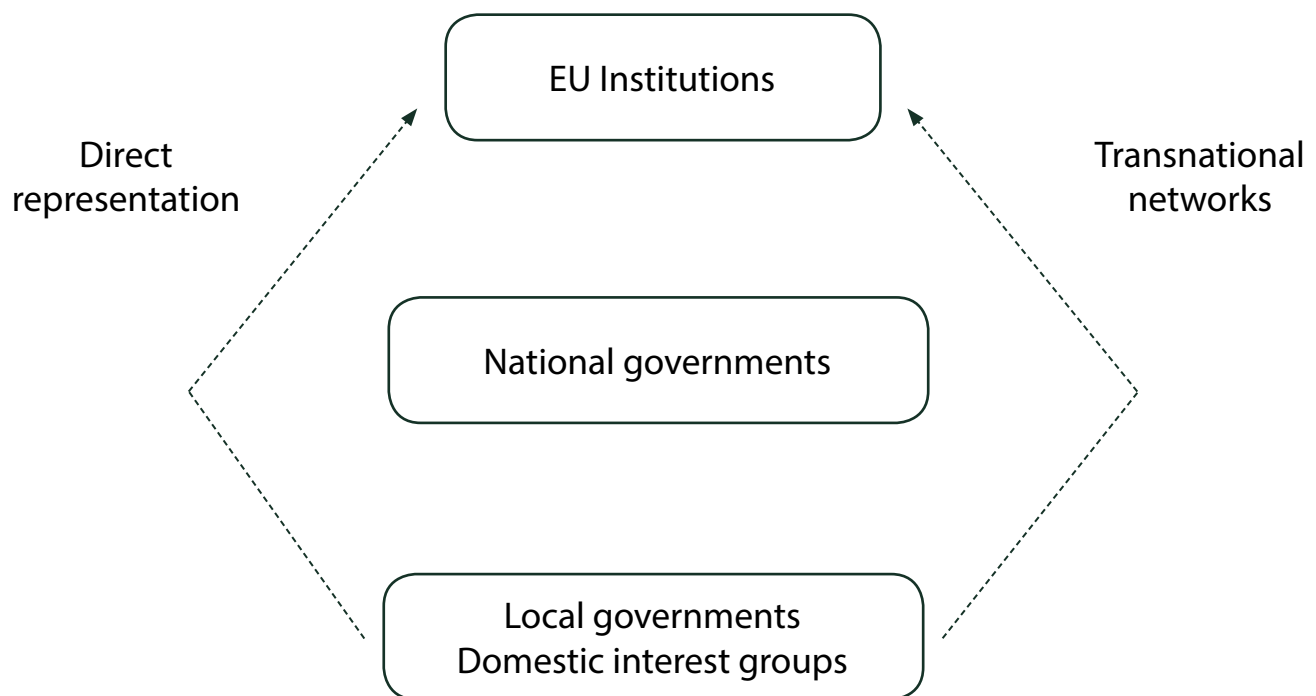Stable URL: http://www.jstor.com/stable/resrep02152.5

Multilevel Governance Theory

The term multilevel governance (MLG) was developed by the political scientist Gary Marks (1993). The concept aimed in particular to capture and understand political processes related to the emergence of supranational institutions such as the European Union and to facilitate analysis of decentralized decision-making processes, in which sub-national level governments and civil society have come to have increasing influence. As the word, "multilevel" suggests, the concept of MLG comprises numerous state and non-state actors located at different levels, such as the local (sub-national), the national and the global (supranational). The challenge pinpointed by MLG theorists is that these diverse levels of government must somehow be aligned to enable the definition of collective goals (Bache and Flinders 2004, Betsill and Bulkeley 2006, Bulkeley et al. 2003).

According to MLG theory, states are no longer the monopolizing or even necessarily central actors of policy-making. Instead, the power of government is increasingly shaped by and shared between actors operating at multiple levels. As a consequence of this development, "the role of the state is being transformed as state actors develop new strategies of coordination, steering and networking that may protect and, in some cases, enhance state autonomy" (Bache and Flinders 2004). The general starting point of MLG theory is therefore that we are witness to a series of reconfigurations of the relationships and modes of interactions between states and other levels of government. This poses the challenge of specifying new mechanisms of control and accountability between such governmental bodies.

From this point of view, REDD+ governance can be characterized as a type of MLG. For example, REDD+ governance involves supranational governance facilitated by global level institutions such as the World Bank's Forest Carbon Partnership Facility (FCPF) and United Nations (UN)-REDD. Nationally, the governments of developing countries are seen to play an important role in implementing diverse policy measures in order to reduce rates of deforestation and forest degradation. However the achievement of this task is also recognized to require the active participation of subnational state and non-state actors such as involved industries and, especially, the communities that actually manage and use forests. In this section, I discuss how theories related to MLG can help conceptualize REDD+ governance processes. At the end of the section, I indicate some of limitations of this framework.

Hooghe and Marks (2001) argued that theories of multilevel governance can be classified as two distinct types, though they did not see these types as mutually exclusive. The first type of MLG refers to governance with a clear structure and a vertically tiered hierarchy, in which only a limited number of authorities have actual decision-making powers (Fairbrass and Jordan 2001). This analysis of MLG focuses largely upon interactions between different levels of governance and their policy outcomes. From the point of view of this approach, national states retain the central role in defining collective goals. Even so, local governments and non-state actors are viewed as having varying degrees of agency and ability to influence policy-making. For example, lower levels of governance

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                        │     EU Institutions     │
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    Direct                                              Transnational
 representation                                            networks

                        ┌─────────────────────────┐
                        │                         │
                        │   National governments  │
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                        ┌─────────────────────────┐
                        │   Local governments     │
                        │  Domestic interest groups│
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Figure 1. 'Type I' (nested) multilevel governance (adapted from Fairbrass & Jordan 2001, p. 501).
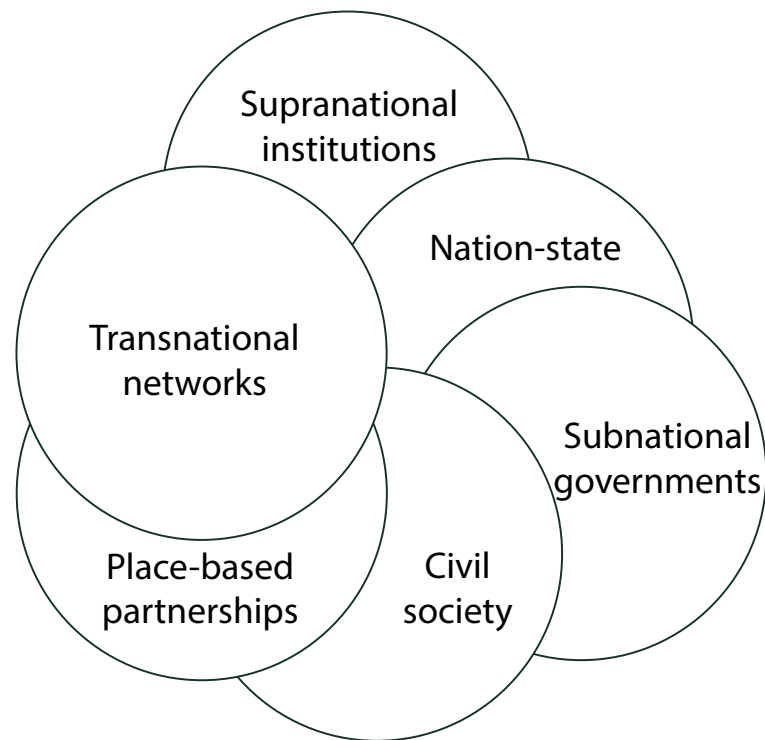
This figure is extracted from Bulkeley et al. 2003.

may be able to by-pass the decision-making processes at the national level by defining problems in local terms. Or, they might make effective alliances at the global level, again avoiding the national level. However, no matter this flexibility, these levels of governance remain dependent on national level governance, since it is the governmental frameworks of nation states that create the very opportunities to bypass the national level, either by localizing or globalizing decisions (Bulkeley et al. 2003).

The second type of MLG is referred to as "polycentric" and is largely inspired by the work of Vincent and Elinor Ostrom. In contrast with the hierarchical model, Elinor Ostrom (2010, 552) characterized polycentric governance as "multiple governing authorities at different scale rather than a monocentric unit". The central point for polycentric MLG is that the clear structures and hierarchies assumed in the previous model are blurred, or even disappear completely, due to the interactions among different governing bodies and actors. Indeed, this blurring occurs not only between different "levels" of governance, but

also between different forms of governance, such as state and non-state (Bulkeley 2003). Rather than clearly defined levels, "polycentric" MLG therefore operate with concepts such as "spheres of authority" (Rosenau 1997) or "complex overlapping networks" (Bache and Flinders 2004), which are constituted, or emerge, in situations where territorial or non-territorial based networks negotiate, collaborate or disagree on agendas and decisions (Bulkeley 2003).

Finally, though not directly a part of multilevel governance, it is worth remarking on the recently proposed research framework for earth system governance (Biermann et al. 2010). Earth system governance is defined as the "interrelated and increasingly integrated system of formal and informal rules, rule-making systems, and actor-networks at all levels of human society (from local to global) that are set up to steer societies towards preventing, mitigating, and adapting to global and local environmental change and, in particular, earth system transformation, within the normative context of sustainable development"

Figure 2. 'Type II' (polycentric) multilevel governance.

This figure is extracted from Bulkeley et al. 2003.

(Biermann et al. 2010, 279). This definition is so encompassing that it might cover almost any aspect of environmental governance and action, from village boards to international agreements. Accordingly, the research framework covers not only the interests of MLG (formal rules and complex interrelations between levels of formal governance) but also of anthropologists of development and social scientists, such as those I discuss in later sections, who analyze processes and outcomes of natural resource management. Due to its comprehensive scope, earth system governance is necessarily abstract and difficult to operationalize. Further, because it draws on multiple sources of social theory, the epistemological and methodological presuppositions of the framework appear eclectic, if not incoherent.[3] In fact, as I continue to discuss, the analytical assumptions of MLG theory have already been criticized from the point of more culturally and historically sensitive social science approaches.

Before turning to these critiques, let me briefly summarize what we have learned about MLG so far. In spite of

differences, the two approaches to MLG share several features. In general, they agree that the role of the state is diminishing, or certainly changing, as various levels of governance interfere with its powers. While state agents retain certain amounts of control, the power to make decisions is transferred in multiple directions, upwards, downwards and sideways, with somewhat unpredictable consequences. This situation creates simultaneous problems and opportunities for effective state governance. On the one hand, problems relate to the aforementioned diminished capacity of states to actually control governance. On the other hand, the fact that the arenas of governance are multiplying also means that states have better possibilities for delegating responsibilities to other levels of governance, which may enable states to effectively target their resources on the particular issues and projects they consider important. As well, state level government is enabled to mobilize and draw upon the resources of actors at other levels, including non-state governance bodies, in trying to achieve their objectives.

Another general observation of the MLG literature is the increasing importance of mobilization at the subnational governance level. The effectiveness of such mobilization seems most effective when subnational levels of governance create strong connections with civil society organizations. The reason for this increased effectiveness is that lower levels of government can more easily gain the attention and interest of national governing bodies if they can convincingly demonstrate that they have forged strong links with local civil society organizations and are able thereby to claim that they represent the interests of these organizations. Hay (2004, 235-238) refers to this process with the term *dual convergence*. This notion is used to describe situations within the complex territories of multilevel governance, in which subnational authorities end up promoting local (and thus relatively narrow) interests through lobbying activities: in that sense they may come to operate as extensions of civil society agendas not of their own making. At the same time, however, NGOs and social movements invariably come to take over some of the governing responsibilities previously located squarely in the hands of official subnational governing bodies. In other words, it is as if civil society "seeps into" lower levels of governance through new routes, while simultaneously state governance "seeps into" civil society too. Attentiveness to this increasing complexity and hybridization of governance is one of the central benefits of current MLG thinking. Even so, MLG theory suffers from a number of recognized weaknesses, which falls into two broad groups. The first and most important is the epistemological and methodological presuppositions of MLG. The second is the limited empirical engagement of these approaches with systems of governance that have evolved outside the highly regulated zones of the EU and the US.

In his review of MLG theory from the point of view of the challenges of governance in South East Europe, Paul Stubbs (2005) discusses both of these problems. As regards the epistemology of MLG, Stubbs notes that the literature is dominated by a "peculiar 'realist modernism' untouched by the 'cultural turn' in much of the social sciences" (Stubbs 2005, 66) and in particular of the work of Michel Foucault (to which I return in the later section on governmentality). Inspired by this literature, Stubbs

identifies what he views as the three central problems with MLG: "premature normativism", "abstract modelling" and "rehashed neo-pluralism".[4]

By premature normativism, Stubbs points to the tendency in the MLG literature to surreptitiously shift between the scientific task of understanding "how" MLG works, to the policy oriented task of evaluating "how well" it works. Doing so, MLG-theorists take for granted governance *should* in fact become multi-jurisdictional, without critically analyzing the implications of this change.

The problem of abstract modeling exacerbates this problem. Theoretical modeling, Stubbs argues, is a dominant preoccupation in much mainstream political science. However, the modeling of multilevel governance relies on assumptions, often unstated, of the elements that make up governance relations. Further, Stubbs suggests, such models, though they can certainly be heuristically useful, are inherently reductive, since the multiple dimensions of empirical reality are reduced to a limited set of variables.

Thus there is an inherent tension between the theoretical models of multilevel governance and specific cases of governance, especially cases that are radically different from the ones used to model MLG theory in the first place. Thus, Stubbs argues that MLG theories and analytical frameworks that were originally developed primarily to analyze Western European governance runs into a series of empirical and conceptual difficulties in the context of South East European governance. For example, the assumption that governance is a way of balancing competing interest groups is hard to square with the "complexities and paradoxes of 'failed', 'weak', 'authoritarian'" (Stubbs 2005, 73) states in South East Europe. How does "the broadly consensual notion of multilevel governance, framed in terms of technical questions of 'co-ordination'" (Stubbs 2005, 73) asks Stubbs, allow analysts to deal with war torn countries, 'neo-protectorates', dictatorships and the like? Similar questions may well also arise when MLG is applied in other contexts, whose governance contexts do not resemble Western Europe or the US.

Thus, Stubbs refers to MLG as a kind of "rehashed neo-pluralism". By this he means that MLG is premised on a basically liberal, pluralist and consensual understanding of the distribution of power in society. The problem is that issues of power, stratification, and contestation are rendered invisible from such a perspective. Governance, even if conducted at multiple levels, is seen as ideally unfolding as the "coherent implementations of a unified discourse and plan" (Stubbs 2005, 72, citing Clarke 2004, 94). What capacity, asks Stubbs, does MLG have for dealing with the "paradoxes, tensions and incompatibilities" of governance? This critical question is especially relevant if one thinks of applying MLG in the context of developing countries, since it is precisely in such countries that the aforementioned paradoxes, tensions and incompatibilities are most likely to impact governance outcomes.

In view of these critiques, Stubbs urges skepticism towards the claims of MLG. His central argument is *for specificity*. Following Dolowitz and Marsh (2000) he encourages governance researchers to ask concrete questions such as "why do actors engage in policy transfer? Who are the key actors involved in the policy transfer process? What is transferred? From where are the lessons learned? What are the different degrees of transfer? What restricts or facilitates the policy transfer process?" and "How is the project of policy transfer related to policy success or policy failure? (Dolowitz and Marsh 2000, 8). These questions are, of course, quite particular. However, Stubbs' call for analytical frames and methods capable of dealing with diverse empirical contexts and histories re-occurs in a range of discussions on the relations between governance and society. As we will see, various approaches, in spite of internal differences, advocate detailed ethnographic or micro-sociological approaches as indispensable methods if the aim is to understand the actual contexts and effects of governance.

As should be clear from this discussion, MLG raises as many questions as it resolves. These are questions of epistemology and method, and they are questions about how to engage seriously with the specific settings and contexts of environmental governance in developing countries.[5] To understand such contexts, we need better social scientific tools to deal with issues such as the specific relations between state and non-state actors, relations between agency and power, and with questions of responsibility and equity. In the next section, I therefore turn to a discussion of democracy, accountability and civil society relations.