P182 / Changing Policies from Below? Subnational Policy Capacity and the Multilevel Governance of Sustainability

Topic : Multilevel Governance and Local Policy

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GENERAL OBJECTIVES, RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND SCIENTIFIC RELEVANCE

Subnational governments (Sates, Regions, Local Governments) are key actors in the transition toward sustainability. They contribute in two main ways. They adopt sustainability policies, which aim to mitigate and adapt to climate change, protect biodiversity and reduce pollution (Nagel & Kammerer 2023). They integrate climate and environmental goals into other policy sectors, such as agriculture, food, mobility or housing (Rogers et al. 2023). Their role has grown for two reasons. On the one hand, national and supranational authorities increasingly recognise and empower them. For instance, the Paris Agreement brought cities and regional authorities into the core of climate governance (Hale 2016). On the other hand, many initiatives emerge from the bottom up. For example, more than 500 cities have joined city food networks (Moragues-Faus 2021). Yet we know relatively little about their policy capacity when national choices conflict with local goals or constrain subnational competences (Fenna et al. 2023). Research also tends to focus on pioneer cities, overlooking ordinary and rural places (van der Heijden 2018). In this context, the panel examines the policy capacity of subnational governments to contribute to the transition toward sustainability and to shape its national and supranational regulation.

Policy capacity research, which has primarily focused on national governments, defines it as the ability to mobilise resources to make collective choices (Painter & Pierre 2005), or as the skills and resources required to perform policy functions (Wu et al. 2015). Research on subnational governments adopts a relational perspective (Eckersley 2017), stressing coalitions and the ability to influence national or supranational decision-making (Pasquier 2015) and local interest groups (Senegas 2022). We therefore define subnational policy capacity as the ability of subnational governments to define problems, choose policy orientations, partners and instruments, mobilise resources and coalitions, and influence the decisions made by higher levels of government and local interest groups. We examine both how national governments shape subnational action and how subnational governments seek to influence national policies and rules.

The panel asks: how do subnational governments build and mobilise policy capacity to adopt sustainability policies and integrate environmental objectives into other policy sectors? How does this capacity differ across levels? To what extent can they use it to reshape national and international agendas, policies and frames?

Papers may explore three dimensions. First, acting within multilevel constraints: support from higher levels can strengthen subnational policy capacity (Eckersley 2018), while national and supranational policies can also constrain local action and block local innovation (Enguer & Navarrete 2025). Second, subnational governments as policy entrepreneurs: beyond the well-documented role of transnational city networks (Kern 2019), other channels – associations of local governments, lobbying, litigation, and using delegated powers to resist national policy – deserve greater attention. Third, building and losing capacity over time: partisan change, emerging local issues and conflicts can reshape subnational policy capacity (Senegas 2024).

The panel makes three contributions. It strengthens the application of the policy capacity framework at the subnational level. It conceptualises policy capacity as a political construct that changes over time. It places subnational policy initiatives in the wider context of national and supranational regulation, to assess what they can achieve and how they may transform this regulation.

CALL FOR PAPERS

This panel invites papers examining the policy capacity of subnational governments in two areas: sustainability policies (climate mitigation and adaptation, biodiversity protection and pollution reduction) and environmental policy integration, understood as the integration of environmental objectives into other sectoral policies. Contributions may focus on one specific sector, such as energy, water, agriculture, food or mobility, or explore interactions across sectors (nexus approach).

We welcome contributions on all types of subnational government: states and provinces in federal systems,

Regions, metropolitan areas, cities, small municipalities and inter-municipal bodies. We propose a common lens to study their policy capacity: how subnational governments define problems, choose orientations, partners and instruments, mobilise resources and coalitions, and influence higher levels. Papers may examine all components, focus on one of them, or add new ones. It can also be discussed or challenged: papers that build on empirical research to refine this framework are particularly welcome.

The lens applies to all levels, from municipalities to federated states, and allows comparisons across levels of government and across countries. We especially encourage papers on less studied levels and places. These include the intermediate level between local and national governments, such as regions, Länder or autonomous communities. We are particularly interested in fieldwork on inter-municipal bodies and small municipalities in rural areas, beyond pioneer cities, which are better documented.

We also particularly welcome papers that examine what local policies can achieve, under national and supranational regulatory constraints, and how they can transform this framework. All papers must be based on original empirical research, addressing one or more of the following dimensions:

1) Acting within multilevel constraints.

How do subnational governments develop sustainability policies and integrate environmental objectives into other policy sectors within, despite or against national and supranational policy choices? How do support from higher levels of government, legal obligations or pre-emption shape their policy capacity?

2) Subnational governments as policy entrepreneurs.

How do subnational governments act as policy entrepreneurs to reshape national or international agendas, policies and frames? Relevant mecanisms include diffusion and upscaling, city networks, associations of local governments, coalitions with non-state actors, lobbying. We also welcome papers examining conflicts with higher levels of government, including resistance through litigation.

3) Building and losing capacity over time.

How does local policy capacity evolve in response to changes in multilevel relations and local political context including partisan shifts, emerging local problems, and conflicts among interest groups or local populations?