



Water management in a farm using an agroecological approach for land use and supported by the Municipality of San Nicolás in the Ñuble region, Chile.

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Local democracy and the legitimization of climate action in rural municipalities of Sweden, Chile and the US

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Introduction

Rural municipalities are the locus of some of the most basic political problems and dilemmas of climate action. Local governments have the political task of juggling the following:

- Effects of climate change,
- Consequences of global climate change initiatives that target rural resources,
- Competition for resources because of climate change mitigation goals,
- Local politics of decisions adopted by national and regional governments implementing national-scale climate policies, and
- The need to provide solutions to non-climate related everyday needs.

In addition, competition between climate action and other rural development projects deepens existing, already conflict-laden, divisions among interests in forest, land and water in rural areas (FAO, 2013).

Studies show that climate action imposes new pressures and political roles on local governments (Damsø et al., 2016; Granberg and Elander, 2007; Measham et al., 2011; Pasquini and Shearing, 2014). New pressures and roles for local governments can raise questions about the legitimacy of national and regional decision making concerning local rural resources. The legitimacy problem becomes even more pressing when we see a global crisis of national democracies, which is inseparably linked to legitimacy (Przeworski, 2019). In short, when national governments interfere in what are perceived as local decisions, the national crisis of legitimacy is deepened. Further, when local governments cannot serve their citizens due to national impositions, the local governments too lose legitimacy (Ribot, 2004).

Abstract

Case studies in rural Chile, Sweden and the US, show that climate policy often leads to conflicts with other rural development objectives. Rural municipalities thus need new tools to balance climate change action with other important local demands. This brief highlights how national- and state-level implementation of the Sustainable Development Goal 13 (climate action) interacts with local forestry, agricultural and urban development decisions. Those interactions present new challenges for rural municipalities which must deal with both climate change itself and international climate initiatives. Policy issues are analysed to illustrate how democratic innovations can generate more legitimate climate action in rural municipalities.

About ICLD

The Swedish International Centre for Local Democracy (ICLD) is part of the Swedish development cooperation. The mandate of the organization is to contribute to poverty alleviation by strengthening local governments.

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Thus, there are good reasons for the international community and national governments to foster local democracy and the regulatory capacity of rural municipalities. First, it can generate more legitimate – and thus politically sustainable – climate change policy. Second, it will help legitimize and strengthen democracy at the local and national level. To function well, democratic local governments need a) to be accountable to their citizens, and b) to have meaningful powers (resources and authority) to respond to citizens’ needs (Agrawal and Ribot, 1999). Yet, strengthening local democratic processes requires acute attention to the legal and institutional arrangements where rural democratic local governments turn policy into practice (Alarcón, 2021). It is here that environmental governance discourses are often limiting democratic local participation in public policy. Though local democracy can contribute to site-specific solutions, the democratization of resource management means democratic struggles, and this is, of course, “unavoidably political and embedded in many layers of interest particular to site and country” (Ribot, 2017).

The cases in this brief present possible paths towards, and barriers to, greater legitimacy of local climate policy in rural settings. This can happen by supporting and working through local democratic government. The cases illustrate different forms of the interplay between local democracies that are so deeply involved in rural politics and the national as well as regional levels of governance. Conflicts about resources located in rural areas are a part of this interplay. The cases show that local climate action has to be seen as a social and political process connected to other local needs for political action. In more conceptual terms, the brief highlights issues of legitimacy in the processes and procedures for representation of local actors, transparency and accountability in environmental governance (input legitimacy) as well as the legitimacy of the problem solving capacity and the effectiveness of local environmental governance (output legitimacy) (See Bäckstrand, 2006). The brief also highlights the importance of politically considering how resources, needs and aspirations are interconnected (Bleischwitz et al., 2018) with the possibilities for fostering participation in the production of environmental knowledge. This involves decision making about local environmental monitoring and assessment (Alarcón et al., 2021) that can provide a knowledge base for rural policy related to climate action.



The Downsville dam located about 30 kilometres from municipality of Andes in a rural area of Delaware County in New York State, US.

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Methods

The cases used in this brief include different political and rural settings, different resources and climate action perspectives. The empirical insights are based on fieldwork in the Ñuble region in Chile, the Uppsala region in Sweden and in New York State's Delaware County in the US. Fieldwork took place during 2017 and 2021, and included interviews, field observations, collection of documents and secondary sources (for example, municipalities' development plans and local regulations). Selected empirical insights from these cases are used to understand how policy issues concerning interactions between local climate change action and the use of land, water and forests can be addressed in rural settings.

Research Insights and Conclusions

The prospects of local climate action in the Ñuble region in Chile, the Uppsala region in Sweden and Delaware County in New York State call attention to two central dimensions in rural climate change policy. The first is the challenge created by interactions between national/regional politics for development and the local political economy of rural production. The second dimension is the range of possibilities for local planning of resource use. We can see the interplay of such challenges and possibilities in each case as follows:

Challenges due to the interactions between national/regional politics for development and the local political economy of rural production:

- In Delaware County, the decline of rural areas, and the land regulations agreed with New York City to preserve the water quality in the area for provision of drinking water to New York City, create a context where prospects of rural development need to be negotiated and renegotiated in terms that are not always defined by local rural interests.
- In the Ñuble region, the overarching role of forestry development based on industrial tree plantations primarily for production and export of wood pulp, and its dominant place in the national rural policy, collides with local attempts to preserve agriculture and water resources with the aim of protecting rural livelihoods.
- In the Uppsala region, the growth of the main city in the region, namely, Uppsala, and the water requirements for that city, lead to democratic questions concerning the management of a lake that is also administered by the rural municipality of Heby in the same region. The water levels of the lake are crucial for managing water for Uppsala and a court decision regulates the water level, which causes challenges for the local livelihoods around the lake.



Expansion of fibre-optic internet connections in a rural area of Uppsala, Sweden.

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Possibilities for local policy in rural municipalities in each area:

- The case of the municipality of Andes in a rural area of Delaware County in New York State shows that in 2013 Andes implemented local regulations to impede fracking activities in the municipal territory. These regulations were in place before 2015 when a state-wide ban on fracking was implemented. This legal capacity for local regulation is supported by the recognition of Home Rule at the constitutional level in New York State. Due to increasing threats from floods in the municipal territory, and their connections to climate change, in 2015 the Town Board of Andes passed the Local Law 2 of 2015 to establish a Flood Commission. One result of that commission is the participation of local citizens and authorities in local planning to mitigate and prevent the effects of floods. Also, under the supervision of the commission, a local flood analysis was made available in 2018 and this includes a comprehensive action plan to face and prevent floods in the area. In the Ñuble region, the overarching role of forestry development based on industrial tree plantations primarily for production and export of wood pulp, and its dominant place in the national rural policy, collides with local attempts to preserve agriculture and water resources with the aim of protecting rural livelihoods.
- The case of Heby Municipality in Uppsala region shows that this municipality has focused its environmental work on planning for renewable energy, which is also seen as part of local climate action. This local policy has been shaped by the municipality co-ownership of an energy company that delivers electricity to the local population using renewable resources and also invests in new sources for renewable energy. The company offers sources of income to local farmers who can combine agriculture with the installation of solar panels. Also, revenues from the municipal energy company are used to contribute to rural development initiatives designed by the municipality. Today, the municipality is actively facilitating the expansion of fibre-optic internet. This aims at enabling better local living conditions and economic prospects while at the same time maintaining the rural and agriculture characteristics of the area. The municipality has also implemented plans to locally work with the Sustainable Development Goals of United Nations' Agenda 2030.
- The case of the Municipality of San Nicolás in the Ñuble region shows that this municipality adopted a municipal ordinance that declared the municipality an agro-ecological municipality. This agroecological orientation is conceived to guide the actions of the whole municipality. Also, and through the framing and enactment of the Municipal Development Plans, this agroecological orientation is also conceived as climate action. This connects with the ambition of the municipality to promote agricultural livelihoods, and in so doing reducing and limiting industrial-scale plantation forestry in the area. In addition, the municipal efforts to develop agroecology are conceived as a way to change the recent trajectories of local land use

that has decreased agricultural areas in favor of tree plantations with risks for massive wildfires in these plantations.

A common issue in these cases is that local authorities have used different forms of local regulatory capacity to address climate change challenges while adopting local plans to address other pressing local issues. For example, when climate action is connected to the risks and negative social and environmental consequences of industrial forestry, there are also implications for water, land and forest use in the climate change action components of rural development plans.

The current implementation of the Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 13, which is framed in terms of “Take urgent action to combat climate change and its impacts” (United Nations, 2015), and the difficulties associated with its definition of targets and indicators to measure its achievement, shows us a new dimension in the problematic interaction between national/state level climate action goals and local realities. In this regard, the SDG13 gets politically entangled with different objectives for local resources. A problem here is that the implementation of SDG13 is reported in relation to national scale targets and goals concerning SDG13. However, national and even state-level assessments tell little about the meaning and conflicts in local implementation of the SDG13. Within this context, local institutional contexts play an important role, and it is important to consider the context-specificity of implementing the SDG13 in rural areas. This creates important challenges for climate policy that can be effective while at the same time being legitimate at the local level. On the other hand, as the examples above show, the regulatory capacity of rural municipalities allow democratic innovations with potential for transformative and participatory governance needed for more legitimate climate change action in rural settings.

Thus, strengthening the institutions for local democracy and the regulatory capacity of rural municipalities are important steps to overcoming barriers to legitimacy in rural climate action. That strengthening needs to include provision of enough resources to foster participation in local monitoring and assessments of resources. In these processes, it is essential that institutional reforms allow more empowered participatory governance by marginalized rural people in the local decisions on resources. In principle, this could help empower both rural inhabitants and municipalities in areas with growing power asymmetries concerning data production on water, forest and land resources. However, all this depends on contingent political processes. Therefore, it is crucial to explicitly consider the politics of local democracy in any effort to further develop rural local democracy for policy legitimacy in climate action.

Policy Recommendations for Local Policymakers and Civil Servants in Rural Municipalities

Despite the challenges identified, these cases show paths towards local democratic innovations in dealing with local resources and more legitimate local climate policies. Based on these cases, policy recommendations for local policymakers and civil servants in rural municipalities are presented below.

- Innovate by taking local climate action through engagement of rural municipalities. This aims to integrate and balance climate action decisions with other local priorities. Civil servants working in rural municipalities should have a key role in fostering the legitimacy of local policies to balance climate action decisions with other local priorities.
- Legitimate local climate-action decisions by making them through citizen participation in local democratic processes that consider other local resource use and management priorities. This should include expanding the shared knowledge base for decision making through environmental monitoring and assessment. Such local legitimacy is essential for the sustainability of any intervention. Local policymakers should ensure more legitimate local climate-action decisions by promoting democratic innovations to strengthen and allow citizen participation in local environmental policies.
- Use local implementation of SDG13 (climate action) as an opportunity to create more horizontal interactions between rural municipalities and other authorities in environmental policymaking for climate action. Local governments should foster political discussions about how the local implementation of SDG13 can be seen as an opportunity to address how decisions on key local resources for climate action can be managed in more legitimate and democratic ways.

Questions for further discussion:

1. In your rural municipality, how can you as a civil servant improve the current legal, regulatory and knowledge base capacity of your municipality for climate action?
2. What type of state reforms should representatives of local governments promote to empower rural municipalities for more legitimate climate action?
3. How could local policymakers in rural areas foster more legitimate climate change action at national and local levels?

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