

David Gibbs & Gerd Lintz (2015): Editorial: Environmental Governance of Urban and Regional Development – Scales and Sectors, Conflict and Cooperation, *Regional Studies*, DOI: 10.1080/00343404.2015.11110569

## Introduction

Recent years have continued to see a concern for the detrimental environmental impacts of human economic activities particularly in the form of enhanced global warming, sea level rise, land degradation and deforestation. Although it can be argued that economic development and growth remain the priority for governments at a variety of spatial scales or levels, these same governments also express a desire through a growing number of policy initiatives to make such development more sustainable and environmentally-friendly. A growing interest amongst policy makers has been in identifying the ways in which environmental protection measures can be made complementary to economic development aims. Rather than seeing the environment and the economy in opposition, there has been a focus on the growth potential from developing a green or low-carbon economy (OECD, 2011). At the urban and regional scale governments have increasingly begun to try and position themselves as destinations for new forms of green economy investments as a source of a new round of capital accumulation (GIBBS and O'NEILL, 2014). In total then, questions around the environment, climate change and sustainability look set to grow in importance for decision makers in cities and regions.

## A developing field of research

This theme issue focuses on the extent to which urban and regional development policies can be 'greened'. Whether such an environmentally sustainable development can be

achieved very much depends on the political actors and the institutional framework in which they interact; scales and sectors, as well as conflict and cooperation, play a prominent role. Some scholars have suggested that the urban and regional *scales* have a particular importance as key sites to combine environmental and economic policies and have a capacity to act within the overall politico-administrative system (GIBBS, 2005). This growing, but still under-explored, field of research might be called *urban and regional environmental governance*, albeit that the term regional environmental governance has so far rarely been used (for exceptions see: WHILE et al., 2000; WALLINGTON et al., 2008). The notion of governance reflects empirical observations that the role of nation states and hierarchical political steering has been complemented or even outstripped by negotiations within a multi-level, multi-sector and multi-actor political and planning system (e.g. CHHOTRAY and STOKER, 2010). Accordingly, environmental governance can be defined as the 'study of how to steer the relations between society and the environment' (EVANS, 2012, p. 4). More specifically for the purposes of this theme issue, urban and regional environmental governance can be understood as dealing with the structures of policy-making and planning, and actors' interactions with these, that are, firstly, concerned with taking into account environmental factors and secondly, can be found at the urban and regional scale or politico-administrative level. It is important to note that the urban and regional scales are often closely connected. Moreover, both are embedded into the national political and planning system, constituting a multi-level governance system (e.g. WHITEHEAD, 2007; BULKELEY and BETSILL, 2013).

Apart from scales, *sectoral* policies also play a crucial role in both the practice of, and research into, environmental governance (e.g. GIBBS et al., 2003; HERRSCHEL, 2013). There are specialised actors and institutional sub-systems for economic and environmental policies which can be broken down into a range of sectoral policies regarding, for example, manufacturing, transport, housing and energy, or policies addressing climate change, biodiversity loss, nature-related recreation and air pollution. A key question here is how actors in cities and regions can find ways to combine environmental protection measures and economic development aims so that they are complementary, for instance by attracting an environment-sensitive, highly-qualified workforce (e.g. FLORIDA, 2006) or investment in a green economy (e.g. GIBBS and O'NEILL, 2014). In the case of carbon emissions where environmental changes are already in train, mitigation policies in many sectors (e.g. PRIEMUS and DAVOUDI, 2014) are complemented through adaptation strategies (e.g. BULKELEY, 2013). Institutionalised urban and regional spatial planning as a specific means of integrating a wide range of sectoral policies concerning land use has also been researched with regard to sustainability (e.g. COWELL and OWENS, 2006; WHEELER, 2009). Beyond scales, sectors and spatial planning, other aspects of urban and regional environmental governance have been examined, e.g. leadership, the participation of citizens, public-private partnerships, lobbying of associations, and the role of science. Moreover, the special facets of environmental justice as well as knowledge, values, power, learning and discourse have been investigated. More recently a new perspective has gained traction – research on sustainability transitions (e.g. TRUFFER and COENEN, 2012) has highlighted the complexity and necessity not only of developing a vision of sustainability, but also the uneven

pathway(s) for the implementation of change. However, despite efforts to integrate environmental and economic aims, actors often perceive conflicting interests which leads to tensions between actors within the whole political system. While conflict often leads to a hardening of actors' positions, cooperation as a particular form of interaction can support finding the best solutions.

Interestingly, research on *urban* environmental governance has already reached a certain degree of maturity: Beyond a number of journal articles (e.g. EVANS et al., 2006; MOL, 2009; KRUEGER and BUCKINGHAM, 2012) there are both textbooks (e.g. RYDIN, 2010) and contributions to handbooks (e.g. MUNIER, 2007; MAZMANIAN and BLANCO, 2014). There is also a growing body of work on the governance of eco-cities, smart cities etc. (DE JONG et al., 2015). Conversely, pertinent analyses of the *regional* level – in the sense of a supra-municipal and sub-national level – often seem to lag behind, perhaps because of its diversity. Regions can have extremely varying institutional bases ranging, for example, from voluntary collaborations of neighbouring municipalities (e.g. HULST and VAN MONTFORT, 2007) and statutory regional partnerships (WALLINGTON et al., 2008) through to political entities with their own parliamentary powers (e.g. THOMAS and RHISIART, 2004). More interesting examples of research on environment and regions with varying reference to governance can be found in two previous special issues of *Regional Studies* (HAUGHTON and MORGAN, 2008; DEUTZ and LYONS, 2008). In order to address these shortcomings at the regional scale and in order to foster interdisciplinary research and discussion in the field of ecological urban and regional development as a dimension of sustainable development, the *Regional Studies Association Research Network on*

*Ecological Regional Development* was established. The papers presented in this theme issue are selected from the third conference of the network which took place in Luxembourg in June 2012.

### The Focus of the Theme Issue

This theme issue explores a wide range of aspects in the field of urban and regional environmental governance highlighting the role of scale and sectors, as well as the conflicts and the potential of cooperation involved. The four papers address various topical policy steering problems in a range of institutional contexts and settings, moving from the examples at the national scale down to the local scale of cities. At the same time, the contributions move from an investigation of 'hard', regulatory and infrastructural factors to the 'softer' factors involved, such as inter-personal relationships. The papers are followed by a concluding editorial dealing with the relationship between research and policy-making in the field.

In most of the case study countries the central state plays a role in urban and regional environmental governance. This is particularly well highlighted in the first paper by I-CHUN CATHERINE CHANG, ERIC SHEPPARD and HELGA LEITNER (2015, in this issue), entitled 'A green leap forward? Eco-state restructuring and the Tianjin-Binhai eco-city model' in which the authors examine the ecological urbanization agenda in China. Drawing on the conceptual framework of eco-state restructuring (WHILE et al., 2010), they argue that the shift of China's national development agenda from growth-first to ecological urbanization is embedded within the country's broader regulatory transformation from a traditional

socialist regime, to market reform, to a potentially new post-economic-crisis stage. Such a shift is articulated with a reorganization of state powers, capacities, regulations, territoriality and strategic projects surrounding environmental governance, shaping Tianjin-Binhai's status as China's new model eco-city and its design details, including sectoral governance arrangements. Here environmental governance shifts are a two-way process, with both upscaling and downscaling to and from the national and urban scales.

A completely different kind of state-municipality relationship can be found in the Western-European state of Luxembourg. In their paper entitled 'Blending scales of governance: Land use policies and practices in the small state of Luxembourg, JULIA AFFOLDERBACH and CONSTANCE CARR (2014, in this issue) focus upon the special case of a region where the city-region is at the same time a country and a state – the Grand Duchy of Luxembourg. Dealing with spatial planning and land use in Luxembourg they introduce the concept of multi-level governance in a two-tier administrative system consisting of the national government and a local level comprising 106 municipalities. Through a focus on housing and retail planning, they indicate that despite plans for a polycentric growth model that tried to both steer and restrict development, these have not been binding on decision makers. In reality, actors have used what Affolderbach and Carr term 'blended scales of governance' to overcome restrictions, often for self-interested reasons. Such blended scales, they argue, are inevitable in a small state such as Luxembourg which is simultaneously both a national and a local place and where informal relations between a small group of actors are a key factor in (often opaque) decision making.

While the state of Luxembourg could, according to size and functional relationships, be understood as a strongly institutionalized city-region, GERD LINTZ (2015, in this issue) examines the potential situation in weakly institutionalized regions. His paper entitled 'A conceptual framework for analyzing inter-municipal cooperation on the environment' highlights the potential for, and factors involved in, voluntary cooperation by municipalities on environmental issues and policies. With a particular focus on the two issues of local green space and global climate change he does so from a theoretical perspective that draws upon work on actor-centred institutionalism and emphasizes the importance of negotiation between sectoral institutional frameworks of both environmental and economic policy leading to eventual agreement and common action. Through investigating voluntary cooperation on the environment between neighbouring municipalities, he develops a mid-range conceptual framework to improve our understanding of this form of environmental governance.

While the preceding three papers mainly address conflicts and cooperation between different scales and between cities, SAMUEL MÖSSNER (2015, in this issue) investigates tensions within them. In his paper entitled 'Sustainable urban development as consensual practice: Post-politics in Freiburg, Germany', he zooms in on the intra-municipal structures and processes involved through an investigation of the role of conflicts in terms of the social side effects of sustainable urban development in the city of Freiburg (Germany). In doing so he questions the ways in which Freiburg is regarded as an eco-city exemplar by both its inhabitants and international academics and policy makers. Drawing on SWYNGEDOUW's (2007) arguments about sustainability as a post-political

project, he criticises Freiburg's emblematic status as an eco-city by investigating those elements of non-consensus and hidden resistance to what appears at face value to be a consensual political strategy for sustainable development.

In total then, the four papers in this theme issue make a contribution to the growing interest in the 'greening' of urban and regional development by both academics and policy makers. The papers indicate the key role of governance in the integration of environmental and economic policies, as well as the ways in which this interacts with the interests of key actors in these localities. But how exactly can policy making benefit from such academic research?

Finally, in the concluding editorial by THIEMO ESER (2015, in this issue), entitled 'Sustainable urban and regional development – bridging the gap between research and policy-making', the author asks how the interaction between academics and policy makers can be improved. Eser draws on the relevant literature and his experience as a practitioner to contribute to this issue a variation on the theme of cooperation by analysing the problem of dissatisfaction on both sides and giving recommendations for increased mutual benefits. In total, this theme issue indicates the growing importance of environmental governance issues for both academics and practitioners, yet also indicates that there is considerable scope for improved understanding and more research from both sides.



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