

Improving water & biodiversity governance in the EU

Dr Felix Rauschmayer describes the potential, and some of the challenges, of good multi-level European governance and policy-making in biodiversity and water, as laid out in the GoverNat project

Could you provide an outline of the objectives of GoverNat?

GoverNat aims to achieve, firstly, a better understanding of the use of participatory processes in European multi-level governance of biodiversity and water, and secondly, to provide advice that can be given to organisers of such processes on all levels as well as to policy makers in both fields with regard to the organisation of participatory processes.

How does GoverNat examine the potential of participatory processes and analytical decision-making tools for the improvement of multi-level governance of water and biodiversity? By what criteria does it measure this potential?

The basis for the assessment is an evaluation grid that distinguishes between criteria

relating to complexity, information and governance culture, legitimacy and politics, social dynamics and civil society, and costs and efficiency. Through interviews, document analysis, etc, GoverNat researchers assess different cases.

What challenges has GoverNat met with recently, and what has been learned from them? How have the combination of analytical tools and participatory processes as a result been better defined and designed before the decision making process?

There have been two main challenges; one concerning the nature of a Marie Curie Research Training Network and the other the objective of research. Firstly, these projects aim at PhD theses of fellows who have to be mobile: between countries and, in our case, between disciplines – for example, from biology to political sciences. Secondly, the specificity of each of the more than 30 analysed cases does not produce any chance of developing a blueprint for the employment of participatory processes and analytical tools, even though all cases are situated in the EU and most of them deal directly with the implementation of European directives (the Water Framework Directive and the Habitats/ Birds Directive, respectively).

How have you been able better to understand European multi-level environmental governance?

We understand better the disparity between abstract theory (mainly from political sciences) and single case studies, often without link to theory. This disparity is due to the singularity of each case (e.g due to political, institutional, natural, or cultural contingencies) that makes it very difficult to reach medium-ground abstractions as a necessary element for bridging theory and empirics. Therefore, 'European multi-level environmental governance' remains an abstract term that looks different in each case.

Has GoverNat initiated a strategy in order to train scientists to communicate with policy makers and the public? How important is the dissemination of research to the general public, and what methods have you used to implement this?

We organised a workshop in Stuttgart with Professor Renn, a GoverNat partner and a worldwide renowned expert on participation and scientific communication with authorities. This dealt in particular with the issue of dissemination towards practice. Additionally, the fellows were trained individually, as their dissemination was mainly based on their

specific cases and the requirements of each case. Disseminating a comparative study on a nation-state level requires methods other than disseminating results in a Hungarian national park – examples of methods used include stakeholder or policy maker workshops, articles in professional journals, policy briefs, etc.

The governance of biodiversity and water in the EU is a complex system and it involves multiple policy levels, from the most local to an international level. How is this being managed, and what other organisations and agencies are you in collaboration with in order to execute this?

In the case studies, researchers have been collaborating with administrations, civil society organisations, and other stakeholders at different levels – local, regional/sub-national and national. As the coordinating team, we are in contact with the European level and will feed back our knowledge to the European Commission.



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How do you value the impact that civil society organisations and local grassroots networks can have in producing shifts in policy and positive environmental outcomes? Are these informal initiatives able to contribute significantly to participatory governance?

They can have an important impact, but their ability depends a lot on the perception of the administration toward participation and toward their inclusion in policy processes. Furthermore, the appreciation of their input also has to take monetary forms, as the amount of voluntary work they are doing often exceeds the amount that is sustainable. Due to the fuzziness of European regulations, their ability to change policies also depends on the national implementation of these regulations, i.e. whether they have the possibility to put their claims to court before more powerful actors create environmentally-negative outcomes.

European biodiversity and water governance

By providing linkages for collaboration in the development of participatory processes and building collective awareness, the **GoverNat** project is helping EU policy makers to understand the interdependencies of multi-level governance

THE GOVERNANCE OF biodiversity and water in the EU is a complex system; it involves the coordination of multiple policies, from the most local level to the international level. It also has to involve a wide variety of actors from governmental and non-governmental sectors, industry, commerce, civil society and private spheres. This inevitably poses challenges for those organising inclusive participation. Public participation and collaborative forms of decision-making have often been proposed as solutions to overcome governance deficits, yet their specific use in multi-level contexts has still not been demonstrated.

THE PROJECT

Multi-level Governance of Natural Resources, or GoverNat, is a project comprising of ten European partner institutes and several praxis affiliates, hosting nine PhD researchers and three postdoctoral researchers. It assesses tools and processes for water and biodiversity governance in Europe. To this end, an elaborate set of evaluation criteria has been developed in order to assess the role of participatory methods in natural resource management, with an overall objective of developing new solutions for multi-level environmental governance and to facilitate their use by decision makers in an enlarged European Union.

Specifically, the project has a number of aims, including better understanding of European multi-level environmental governance, identifying regulatory problems preventing the effective and legitimate management of natural resources, developing participatory methods and analytical decision-making tools to address shortcomings, and to evaluate their use in

case studies. GoverNat also aims to help in designing legitimate and effective participatory processes for the resolution of existing multi-level governance deficits and train scientists to communicate with policy makers and the public, as well as provide an interdisciplinary PhD education for early-stage researchers in the field of EU environmental governance.

INTEGRATING PROCESSES

Dr Felix Rauschmayer, from the Department of Environmental Politics at the Helmholtz Centre for Environmental Research in Leipzig, coordinates the project. "Important questions pertain to the goals that participants and organisers have with respect to participatory processes, the increase or decrease of legitimacy through participation, the involvement of the different levels in policy processes and the role of costs and benefits when designing and implementing such processes," he explains.

According to Rauschmayer, it is difficult, from an external perspective, to measure a process in a quantitative way, or assess the potential of one process or tool over another. He believes that the most important issue here is the organisers' willingness and ability, and the possibility of employing such methods, as well as the political, institutional and cultural context.

He is also acutely aware of the challenge of integrating nine different PhD cases in this setting, as each researcher has to focus on his or her individual academic pursuits. Consequently, they place a high priority on the individual PhD cases in their respective academic environments, while seniors are not funded by the grant and therefore necessarily have to perform a

supervisory role and have difficulties in legitimising the necessary, but huge efforts for integrating results from more than 30 different cases.

Moreover, every case requires careful analysis: "What first might look like an achievement," says Rauschmayer, "for example, the systematic inclusion of stakeholders in English liaison panels for river basin management – might look different upon understanding that the participants are mainly used as an information source and a means of diffusing the accountability of the authority, or different again when viewed against the background of an otherwise completely hierarchical management of nature in England".

A PARTICIPATORY CULTURE

It is clearly important to encourage a participatory culture in implementing more inclusive governance, particularly when comparing cases from North/Western Europe to Central- and East European countries, or to countries with a strong dictatorial history, such as Greece or Portugal. This requires an understanding of the conditions under which hierarchical and 'top-down' governments are willing to relinquish a degree of control and power to lower levels of government and non-state actors, such as civil society institutions; these new rules and discourses, and shifts in the balance of power between 'the old' and 'the new', can sometimes lead to conflicts. The growth of such multi-level policy instruments and more generally, the adaptive capacity of cities, regions and countries, are influenced by a wide range of institutional, societal, economic and cultural factors; more specifically, the influence of international organisations and the implementation of international governance standards both play a part, as well as 'bottom up' changes.

INTERDISCIPLINARITY

A key achievement of the project has been the provision of an interdisciplinary PhD education for early-stage researchers in the field of EU environmental governance. As Rauschmayer points out, "the fellows came from different disciplines – both natural and social sciences – and received network-wide training with regard to sociology, economics, political sciences, law and philosophy. These training measures were complemented with individual training with the partners and exchanges." He also emphasises the importance of the learning progress, particularly for those fellows coming from natural sciences: "Interdisciplinarity is a

sine qua non in this field of research – in our training, the disciplinary background of many courses is not clear anymore, as many of the seniors themselves cross disciplines regularly".

GoverNat is now rapidly coming to an end; the first fellows have left the project and nearly all others will follow in the coming months. "There is no role left for GoverNat as a project," says Rauschmayer, "though we continue to disseminate, of course, to political and scientific audiences, with, for example, an international stakeholder

Interdisciplinarity is a sine qua non in this field of research

workshop in Prague middle of April, a NGO workshop in Berlin in June, input into an EC-workshop this summer, scientific dissemination at the Berlin conference on governance, and a conference of the International Society for Ecological Economics in Oldenburg, Germany, this August". The consortium does not have plans for immediate further collaboration, though most of the partners will continue to work together in other ways.

IMPACT

Rauschmayer admits that it is difficult to assess the impact that GoverNat has had on biodiversity and water governance; consequently it is difficult to assess the impact of the project, since most of the work has been done through analysing different case studies, even though this analysis usually involves the main actors. "All cases having had a history of many years, if not decades," says Rauschmayer, "it would be presumptuous to aim at a clear and sudden change through a short project whose main aim is one of training through research!"

Multi-level environmental governance is a nebulous issue, in practice even more than in theory, and the impact of any action is difficult to assess and still more to evaluate; the bearing that GoverNat has had on concrete cases, though certain, cannot be easily deciphered. Rauschmayer is nevertheless positive about the success of the project: "Most actors in the various cases appreciated their interaction with the GoverNat fellows, who, increasingly, as the project neared completion, were also able to feed back their reflections to their practice partners".

INTELLIGENCE

GoverNat

MULTI-LEVEL GOVERNANCE OF NATURAL RESOURCES IN EUROPE

OBJECTIVES

GoverNat aims at developing new solutions for multi-level environmental governance. The central research objective is to clarify whether participatory processes are useful for improving multi-level environmental governance. The central training objective is to give young researchers an interdisciplinary training 1) in research on European environmental governance, particularly of biodiversity and water, and 2) in designing legitimate and effective solutions for communication between policy makers, scientists and the public.

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