

Unravelling group dynamics in institutional learning processes

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Abstract: Innovation Platforms are created to allow different stakeholders working within different domains of activities to learn to work together towards a common development goal. Learning to work together requires institutional learning- accustomed ways of communication and interaction are questioned, reassessed and reformulated in order to create a common understanding and shared codes of conduct through which meaningful collective action can occur and succeed. Innovation Platforms thus require ‘institutional voids’ in which such type of learning can occur. We want to contribute to the discussion of innovation platforms as drivers of institutional change by taking a closer look at the group dynamics within emerging social bodies. With this we aim at understanding and supporting successful trans-disciplinary group formation in the context of innovation processes. Specific attention will be given to the occurrence of and the dealing with ‘institutional voids’ at such multi-actor interfaces. We further aim at understanding the emergence of different team roles, such as collaborative leaders and brokers, and how they can be distinguished. Moreover, we aim at addressing how individuals take on different roles such as leadership and catalysing functions and how decision making powers are delegated. Finally we aim at understanding how shared institutions are formed to help different stakeholders interact. With this reflection we want to generate insights that can help to facilitate and ease the formation of innovation platforms in the future.

Keywords: collective action, institutional voids, team roles, group formation

Introduction

To create sustainable innovations, people with different interests, perceptions, values and experiences must learn to work together (Ansell & Gash, 2008 ; Arnouts et al., 2012 ; Gollagher & Hartz-Karp, 2013 ; Somorin et al., In Press). Learning to work together requires, however, institutional learning, i.e. formulating and agreeing on new institutional arrangements to ‘work together’ (Johnson & Lundvall, 1992 ; Rodríguez-Pose, 2013). Institutional arrangements are hereby defined as “*place-specific customs and procedures that shape interaction*” (Rodríguez-Pose, 2013, p. 1042). The creation of institutional arrangements takes place over a long period of time, requiring repetitive interactions and trust (Johnson & Lundvall, 1992 ; Morgan, 1997 ; Gertler & Wolfe, 2002 ; Wellbrock, 2013). This process requires institutional learning during which accustomed ways of communication and interaction are arguably questioned, reassessed and reformulated to create a common understanding and shared codes of conduct through which meaningful collective action can occur and succeed. The resulting collective agency can then be defined as “*people’s shared beliefs in their collective power to produce desired results are the key ingredient of collective agency. A group’s attainments are the product not only of shared knowledge and skills of its different members, but also of the interactive, coordinative and synergistic dynamics of their transactions*” (Bandura, 2000:p. 75-76, p. 75-76).

So far, however, little attention has been given to the group dynamics underlying institutional learning processes. In this paper, we want to contribute to the discussion of innovation platforms as drivers of institutional change by taking a closer look at the group dynamics within emerging social bodies (König & Schattenhofer, 2006), particular focussing on the creation of shared institutions while learning to work together. An innovation platform is therefore regarded as a situa-

tion in which different actors acting under different institutions aim to work together towards a common development goal (CORAF/WECARD, 2012). Is it possible to identify what kind of people take which kinds of tasks and roles and how shared institutions are created and manifested? With this reflection we want to generate insights that can help to facilitate and ease the formation of innovation platforms in the future and contribute to understanding and support for successful trans-disciplinary group formation in the context of innovation processes (Knierim et al., 2012).

The paper is structured as follows. First, we aim to analyse three empirical examples of institutional learning processes in different rural areas of the European Union. We will then proceed to reflect on these cases, to identify the underlying group dynamics. Secondly, we will try to identify different roles and tasks taken on by different actors. The resulting insights are used to formulate general conclusions about group dynamics underlying institutional learning processes.

Three empirical examples of institutional learning processes

The following examples are derived from empirical investigations conducted within work package (WP) 4 of the EU FP7 project DERREG (Roep et al., 2011). In WP4, empirical research was conducted within six European rural areas receiving LEADER funds. The aim was to identify how support for joint learning and innovation can best be arranged in order to bring about more collaborative modes of governance. In each case study area, forms of collaboration were identified and analysed and subsequently, the results were compared across the case study areas. In this paper, we select three of the described examples to reflect on the group dynamics underlying the witnessed collaborations. The examples described in this paper are the project “Brug Toekomst” carried out in the Western Part of Groningen province (the Westerkwartier) in the Netherlands from 2003-2008, the creation of the Local Action Group in the area of St. Wendel in the state of Saarland, Germany and the role of “Krabat e.V.” in the LEADER area “Upper Lusatian Heath and Pond Landscape” in Upper Lusatia-Lower Silesia, Germany. Each example represents a case of institutional learning in a different cultural, political and socio-economic context (Wellbrock et al., 2013a ; Wellbrock et al., 2013b).

Brug Toekomst, the Netherlands

The project Brug toekomst ran in the Westerkwartier, a peri-urban area in the North of the Netherlands, from 2003 until 2008 (see also Derkzen, 2009 ; Roep et al., 2011 ; Sol et al., 2013 ; Roep et al., forthcoming). The project was initiated by Wageningen University, Van Hall and Larenstein Universities of Applied Sciences in an attempt to test their research collaborations in a practical setting. In this course, the Westerkwartier was more or less chosen as a research area by coincidence. A lecturer at one of the knowledge institutes participated in one of the nature and landscape associations active in the Westerkwartier. He frequently engaged his students in the association by asking them to investigate questions regarding nature and landscape management practises raised by the members of the association. Through the involvement of this lecturer in the collaboration efforts of the different knowledge institutes, the Westerkwartier was chosen as a research area. In the course of the project, first members of different development initiatives active in the Westerkwartier started to learn to work together. This was mainly facilitated by the activities of students who were assigned with research projects and, in this process, talked to actors of various development initiatives, thereby laying connections. Members of the different development initiatives active in the Westerkwartier started to meet and exchange ideas about their development visions. These meetings were initially facilitated by the involved lecturers from the knowledge institutes. Eventually, also public officers got interested in the development dynamics and started to support the emerging collaborations with a meeting space, public funds and participation in the meetings. Eventually, the project resulted in the formation of the Westerkwartier Initiative Group which acted as a “think tank” and platform for exchange of development ideas in the Westerkwartier. Within the group each member was allowed to raise his or her thoughts

freely and discuss ideas in an informal way. The group also voted for a chairman who organized the regular get-togethers and maintained contact with the different members. In addition, the group organized events, so-called “rural cafés,” to invite other citizens, knowledge workers and public administration to gather under a common theme and exchange development ideas or present new projects. These developments led to a further “spin-off” (Roep et al., forthcoming), whereby members of the Westerkwartier Initiative Group got involved in the Local Action Group of the Westerkwartier, actively shaping the socio-economic development plans of the area. Today, the collaboration of public administration, knowledge institutes and grassroots development initiatives has further developed into a formal, area-wide cooperation (named Gebiedscooperatie) in which development plans are jointly formulated, discussed and implemented (Roep et al., forthcoming).

Cultural Landscape Initiative St. Wendeler Land, Saarland

The Cultural Landscape Initiative St. Wendeler Land operates as Local Action Group in the rural LEADER area St. Wendel of the German state Saarland (Wellbrock et al., 2013a). Initially, the initiative operated as a loose group of different private actors active with rural development in the area St. Wendel. In 2002 (and subsequently again in 2007) the members decided to participate in the competition for LEADER funds and to write a rural development concept for the area. Upon successful application for the LEADER fund in 2002, the initiative was formed into a Local Action Group. In this process, the initiative not only became a legal entity but also introduced members of public administration into its rank. Also, the initiative became a “spider” (Nyhan, 2007), delegating tasks and roles to other initiatives in the area in order to realize their development concept (Wellbrock et al., 2013a). The initiative further organised networking events to encourage exchange between active development initiatives in the area. These networking abilities were argued to be favoured by the long history of the Saarland as being shifted between France and Germany. This shift, as it was argued, resulted in close social networks and social cohesion in the area (Wellbrock et al., 2013a).

Krabat e.V., Upper Lusatia-Lower Silesia

Krabat e.V. is run by Sorbs, a minority living in Saxony and the South of Brandenburg (Wellbrock et al., 2013a). As explained in Wellbrock et al. (2011), Krabat e.V. started out as a grassroots movement with get-togethers of private individuals who pursued the idea to encourage collaboration between local administration and citizens in different villages of Upper Lusatia in order to conserve the Sorbian culture and heritage. Their intention was to create a joint development vision and common development goals among the different rural communities. To realize the intended collaboration, the group became a legal association (Krabat e.V.) in 2001. The idea of Krabat e.V. was further to empower rural communities in the area without relying on public funding. As an alternative, the association developed their own economic concept to ensure liquidity. The members of the association registered, for example, the name “Krabat” (a Sorbian saga figure) as a trademark and sold the label to regional companies and services. This way, members of the association not only ensured their economic autonomy but also developed a regional marketing strategy. Members of the association further engaged in negotiations with public administration, businesses and citizens concerning future development concepts for the area. They also engaged in networking activities between Sorbs and Germans as well as facilitating trans-national networks of Sorbs in Germany, the Czech Republic and Poland. The association has thus become an important network broker bringing together various development activists and connecting them in their common development vision.

Analysis of institutional learning processes

Despite the different contexts in which the three examples were found, their development appears to follow similar patterns. Each of the collaborations started informally through a loosely organized get-together of interested individuals in the respective areas. Moreover, all individuals pos-

sessed of resources, networks and contacts that they activated in the course of realizing their idea of collaboration. In addition, all examples were driven by a shared development vision, engaging a range of diverse actors and activities through delegating tasks and roles aimed at realizing their development ideas. In the following, we will take a closer look at these group dynamics and try to retrace the institutional learning process that took place in the different cases.

Space for informal get-togethers and institutional voids

All examples show that the described collaborations started with informal get-togethers of motivated individuals interested in a certain development trajectory in their specific area. Through these informal get-togethers, different stakeholders were given the opportunity to exchange their ideas, share their knowledge and together develop new ideas and development plans. This process of joint reflexivity is arguably a crucial phase in the institutional learning process, since the potential collaboration partners learn about each other's institutions, including norms, values and interests. Joint reflexivity thereby refers to the ability of a group of people to continuously reflect, monitor and act upon their actions and activities to assess their outcomes and adapt their actions accordingly (Gray & Lawrence, 2000). Swanson (2001) thus argues that joint reflexivity leads to an understanding that certain development goals can only be effectively addressed when people learn to work together.

A further point in this aspect is the informality of these initial get-togethers. Not only did the stakeholders exchange their ideas, they also needed to learn about each other's institutions—norms, values, beliefs, attitudes, interests and behaviours. One can thus argue that institutional voids are necessary (see also Vollmer, 2000) which are defined as situations without “*clear rules and norms according to which politics is to be conducted and policy measures are to be agreed upon*” (Hajer, 2003, p. 175). These institutional voids are arguably necessary to allow stakeholders to negotiate new, joint ways of working together and to formulate new institutions that can be agreed upon by all partners in the collaboration. Similar observations were made by Wellbrock et al (2013b) and Wellbrock and Roep (forthcoming).

Visionary leaders and brokers

Visionary leaders are necessary to create a collaborative atmosphere between people with different resources, powers and interests (Gibney, 2011). A visionary, and moreover collective, leadership is thus crucial to build collective agency and to enhance the process of institutional learning (Sotarauta, 2010 ; Wellbrock et al., 2013b). This is particularly demonstrated by the examples of Krabat e.V. and the Cultural Landscape Initiative Sankt Wendeler Land. In both cases, the initiators had a strong vision of conserving their culture, landscape and heritage and were able to share this vision with other development activists in the region. Through their leadership skills, they were able to involve members of other development activities, to share their visions and to jointly work towards a common development goal.

The results further suggest that visionary leaders need to be distinguished from brokers. Brokers act as connectors, bonding and bridging between different stakeholders, their interests and institutions (Klerkx et al., 2009). Brokers can take various forms; in the Westerkwartier the students from the project were acting as brokers, in Saarland the members of the Cultural Landscape Initiative were acting as brokers and in Upper Lusatia-Lower Silesia the members of Krabat e.V. were acting as brokers. Visionary leaders, however, are those that have an inspiring vision about a certain development concept in their area and they also have the charisma to share this vision and motivate others to contribute to the realisation of their vision (Wellbrock et al., 2013b). The results thus suggest that brokers and visionary leaders need to be distinguished and that both roles are necessary to facilitate institutional learning.

Distribution of tasks and roles

A final point concerns the distribution of tasks and roles among those working together towards a common development goal- who gets to do what and how and who decides which group or person does what and how? As Long (1984) argues, the onset of collaboration between different stakeholders and their different- if not competing- interests, resources, ideas and institutions are usually marked by conflict and power struggles. It seems, for example, that the stakeholder with the best and most needed resource is able to have a larger influence on the way in which tasks and roles are delegated and the way in which they are carried out. When the Cultural Landscape Initiative in St. Wendel became the Local Action Group, it adhered to the institutional arrangements associated with the LEADER programme. It thus formed into a legal association and introduced public administration into its ranks. Also, the delegation of tasks and roles was partly ascribed by the LEADER programme. In this case, the LEADER programme and public administration were largely influential in determining the delegation of tasks and roles.

Furthermore, it is interesting to ask where exactly institutional learning takes place. For example, the Cultural Landscape Initiative in St. Wendel as well as Krabat e.V., both delegated tasks and roles to other grassroots development initiatives, institutes and individuals with particular networks, skills and resources in order to realize their development goals. One can, however, ask to what extent these individuals and groups were involved in the actual institutional learning process. This leads to the question whether institutional learning only takes place among those delegating tasks and roles or does it also involve those that have been delegated specific tasks and roles? Does this then imply that institutional learning only takes place within the initial, informal setting, before tasks and roles are delegated? In this respect, the Westerkwartier Initiative Group is, for example, a platform that continuously encourages institutional learning, because they encourage continuous dialogue leading to new development ideas. This issue raised here certainly needs further scientific attention. The results do suggest, however, that the distribution of key tasks and roles to different persons or groups can be regarded as the outcome of an institutional learning process in which ways of working have been revised and responsibilities and powers have been newly defined.

Conclusion

With this paper we only touched upon the tip of the iceberg that needs to be examined in order to understand the different group dynamics underlying institutional learning processes. Yet, analysing the three examples presented in this paper has given first insights into the group dynamics underlying such institutional learning processes. We have, for example, shown that institutional voids are necessary to allow stakeholders usually active within different domains of activities to negotiate new ways of working together. These voids may be provided by creating room for informal get-togethers and thus room for joint reflexivity and open exchange. As the examples further show, brokers appear to be crucial in connecting different stakeholders and facilitating dialogue and joint reflexivity. In our cases, these brokers ranged from students to development activists to public administrators. Furthermore, brokers need to be distinguished from collaborative leaders which are necessary to help people form joint development visions, pool knowledge and thrive towards common development goals- even across different interests and stakes. The distribution of key tasks and roles to different persons in a network can then arguably be regarded as the outcome of an institutional learning process in which ways of working have been revised and responsibilities and powers newly defined. Future research is, however, necessary to follow up on these observations and to deepen the knowledge necessary to facilitate successful innovation platforms.

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