Polycentric governance - a multi-faceted concept

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Abstract

Abstract for the session "The potentials and limitations of polycentric governance for enhancing resilience in SESs in times of global change" organized by Claudia Pahl-Wostl, Nadine Methner and Kathrin Knüppel The notion of polycentric political systems was introduced by Vincent Ostrom already some decades ago as a system ‘of many centres of decision making which are formally independent of each other’ (Ostrom et al., 1961). The concept has been further developed, extended to go beyond formal political systems and applied to the governance of social-ecological systems. The increasing popularity of the concept has led to a wide range of interpretations. Some use it as a synonym for decentralization which is not in line with the original interpretation. More generally, polycentric governance systems can be defined as complex, modular systems where differently sized governance units with different purpose, organization and spatial location interact to form together a largely self-organized governance regime. From a normative point of view it is of major interest that polycentric systems are assumed to have a higher resilience due to their ability to adapt to a changing environment and to be less affected in their integrity by sudden changes or failure in parts of the system. To substantiate such normative claims with empirical evidence it is essential to develop and use a more systematic approach. The paper will review the development of the concept of polycentric governance and the breadth of its use in conceptual frameworks and empirical analyses. It will suggest and apply a typology for polycentric governance systems which captures the diverse ways how polycentric governance can be realized and how its characteristics can be operationalized for empirical analyses.

Keywords: polycentric governance, adaptive capacity, water governance systems

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