



Overcoming scale mismatch through participatory climate assemblies?

National NGOs as catalysts of climate adaptation at the local level

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Study Rationale, Motivation and Research Objectives:

The climate crisis is undoubtedly the most concerning global issue of our times (Nordhaus, 2019; Rockström et al., 2009), and its destructive effects on humanity are unprecedented. However, this convention has not yet sufficiently dissipated to the public or translated into action at the local and community levels. Scholars and activists are arguing for over two decades now that “A local and regional focus is required to create concrete alternatives and directions within given development pathways” (Bizikova et al., 2007 p. 275). In an effort to address the climate crisis, we witness ongoing focus on governmental policy (Leck & Simon, 2013) and market solutions to the problem (Tompkins & Eakin, 2012.). And the role of international NGOs is also acknowledged for taking central part in the shaping of the global environmental discourse and action plan (Balboa, 2014, 2018). Nonetheless, in order to deliver the urgency of the crisis to the local level, and in order to persuade citizens to change behavioral patterns, involving the people and understanding the roles of mediating actors in addressing climate adaptation is crucial (Betsill & Bulkeley, 2007). Yet, the role(s) and contributions of local NGOs, local governments, their collaborations, and the involved participatory process in addressing this climate crisis and in reaching out to the publics is relatively neglected and understudied.

One of the challenges that climate advocates are facing is the question how to translate a crisis at the global scale into direct, visible, actionable, and clearly understood local plans. The euphemism ‘think global act local’ is oftentimes easier said than done, because people tend to disregard what they do not “see” or “experience” in their daily lives. Moreover, even personal experience with climate change consequences does not affect perceptions and individual behavior, unless people are personally affected or are able to connect their experience to the climate crisis (Whitmarsh, 2008). Therefore, while it is found that the vast majority (76%) of Europeans consider climate change as “very serious problem” (Eurobarometer, 2020), the linkage between the climate crisis and personal-daily decisions and the roles of local level actors in building this linkage remains vague.

We borrow the term **scale mismatch** (Cumming et al., 2006) to describe a gap between the global emergence of the climate crisis and the local action required. **Scale** is a concept that transcends disciplinary boundaries, and is used in sociological theory to capture spatial, temporal, representational and organizational dimensions of a phenomenon or process (*ibid*).

The governance era signifies the growing involvement of non-state actors in environmental management and policymaking (Beer et al., 2012; Phillips, 2012); environmental NGOs are key actors in this global discourse (O'Neill, 2019). Literature on how global NGOs and networks of national and international NGOs aim to address the climate crisis and environmental problems is growing (Abbott, 2012; Bäckstrand, 2008; Balboa, 2018). The efforts are centered on issues, such as global conservation efforts, global treaties and national policies, and is taken place in state-led, national and multilateral forums (Gunter, 2004; Hjerpe & Nasiritousi, 2015). When environmental governance and NGO advocacy is focused on the global international arena, it does not necessarily percolate to the local level. International-local collaborations (Tran & AbbouAssi, 2020) is one way suggested for addressing the “scale paradox” (Balboa, 2018). Yet, research examining why do NGOs navigate across scales, and how do they collaborate locally (AbouAssi et al. 2020), is still missing. This matter is especially pertinent for the issue of climate crisis which is a global crisis necessitating translation to the local level and requiring input from the local level into the policy process.

Translating international NGOs’ activities to the local sphere requires not only translation of global phenomenon to the daily, every day personal decisions, but also modifying the modus operandi of the NGOs. While at the international sphere NGOs activates their professional capacity, at the local level, working with local communities, requires the ability to communicate and deliberate with community members (Greenspan et al., 2021). Therefore, public participation and deliberative processes are suggested for addressing scale mismatches (Few et al., 2007) and the transition from international activity to regional and local one through collaborations and deliberation (AbouAssi et al. 2020; Klinke, 2012). The connectivity between a global climate crisis, national NGOs and local adaptation is an opportunity to examine actors, methods and structures creating or reducing scale mismatches.

Research setting

We offer to address the issue of scale mismatch – of a global climate crisis at the local level – by looking at two participatory settings that are currently progressing in Israel: regional climate assemblies and a citizen assembly on climate change that will take place in the coming Fall. These two initiatives – led by coalition of more than 80 Israeli ENGOs along with environmental units in local and regional municipalities – are aimed at bringing the climate crisis into the local level and incorporating local voices in national climate decision-making. These two settings will serve as our research field.

First, 14 regional climate assemblies have been launched in the last 6 months throughout Israel (<https://climatemeet.org.il>). These participatory assemblies are organized by a coalition of environmental NGOs in collaboration with environmental units in local and regional municipalities, and are aimed at offering adaptation tools to the climate crisis at the local level. These regional assemblies create a participatory process where citizens can share, express and present their views and where NGOs can bring the climate crisis to the local level. Second, a national citizen assembly (Smith, 2021) that is planned to take place around Israel in the upcoming year.

We ask whether these climate assemblies are instrumental in overcoming the scale mismatch of bringing global issues through national-level NGOs to the local level. Studies on citizens' assemblies focusing on the climate crisis deal with deliberative and participatory issues that seek to understand the quality and authenticity of citizen participation, the perceived influence of citizens and the power of this unique methodology (Devaney, et al.,2020; Sandover, Moseley & Devine-Wright, 2021) These settings offer both deliberative and participatory opportunities for connecting organizational actors (NGOs, local government) and individual actors in promoting deliberative democracy (Smith, 2021). Smith (2021) has recently argued that forms of participatory and deliberative politics, especially in shape of assemblies, offer the most effective democratic response to the current global political myopia, as well as a powerful means of protecting the interests of citizens, and future generations.

These settings allows us to address questions such as: how do NGOs help overcome the scale mismatch? Do coalition-building, participatory processes and cross-sector collaborations employed in these climate assemblies are effective strategies in translating global issues to local action? And under what conditions do environmental NGOs able to work with local municipalities and with citizens on climate-related issues? Furthermore, examining these participatory and deliberative methods offer several unique opportunities (1) an opportunity to examine the distinctive features of citizen assemblies and climate assemblies as a means of connecting local, national, and global concerns (2) an opportunity to examine the efforts of national NGOs to cooperate with local municipalities and (3) an opportunity to examine the effectiveness of national NGOs reaching out to local communities using deliberative and participatory tools. Finally, due to the diversity of assembly venues, we are also able to engage in a comparative cross-assembly assessment of the effectiveness, contributions, experiences, and successes or failures of the various initiatives, in order to generate wider discussion on climate change challenges at the local level.

Against this background, our research will seek to address two **research questions**:

- (1) How do national-level environmental NGOs act to translate a global climate crisis to the local level?
- (2) To what extent the process of translation employs deliberative and participatory methods, and whether national NGOs genuinely consider the general public a contributor to the process?

Turning these broad questions into operative **research objectives**, the proposed research is aimed:

1. To identify and characterize methods that translate the challenges of climate crisis to local actors and individuals
2. To examine the extent to which the regional climate assemblies offer innovative and locality-based knowledge to accommodate climate crisis challenges at the local level;
3. To examine the extent to which local adaptation to climate crisis differs among localities and regions;
4. To examine the extent to which participatory and deliberative process are experienced as just and meaningful by organizers and participants in the climate and citizen assemblies.

Research Contribution

The proposed research offers two main contributions. **First**, assessment of the climate assemblies allows examination of the extent to which such initiatives are able to bridge the gap between a global crisis and local reactions, and the role of NGOs local government actors is addressing this gap. Moreover, assessment of the internal nature of the climate assemblies and the variation across assemblies, will uncover mechanisms and practice allowing the translation of a global crisis to regional-local climate adaptation, through mediating actors (such as NGOs and local governments). This assessment can assist in theorizing the involvement of NGOs in addressing the scale mismatch that impedes developing proper adaptation solutions for the climate crisis at the local level. This is a “content” contribution to research on climate change and sustainability.

Second, using the lens of deliberative democracy and participatory processes, and relying on participants' opinions and experiences, this research offers an opportunity for in-depth examination of participation methods and the extent to which participatory processes enhance, shape and influences personal behavioral changes towards more sustainable lifestyles. In particular, examining whether participatory processes have the potential to effectively translate professional knowledge to personal behavioral choices. This is a “methodological” contribution to literature on participatory practices and the role of various actors in such processes.