

Editorial



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Spaces of sustainable politics and practices

The transition towards sustainability, whether in the domains of energy, food, mobility or other products, has become a core topic in transnational policy debates and is considered to be an incubator for new sustainable practices and green growth. Guided, at least rhetorically, by the generic target of enhancing the sustainability of production and society, we are experiencing the emergence and refolding of heterogeneous spaces of governance. While sustainable development, increasingly framed by the new UN development goals, marks the corner stone of political strategies, such as the bioeconomy, green growth or renewable energy transitions, the actual implementation of these programmes is based on practices that derive from constantly reformulated rationalities generated in various complex spatialities. This special issue focuses on the processes that reproduce these distinct but interconnected spaces of policy design, mobility and practice in relation to their embeddedness in the socio-spatial fabrics of different localities and political arenas linked to sustainable transitions. It discusses the features of geographical contexts and explains natural resource governance through the translations of sustainability transition instruments with a focus on renewable energy and the bioeconomy.

During the past decade or so, renewable energy has received growing attention globally, which has started reshaping natural resource production and governance geographies transnationally, nationally and locally. Renewable energy has been proposed as a promising solution for several current societal and environmental challenges. On the one hand, it is linked to climate change policies and the sustainability transformation of energy production. On the other hand, it has been associated with economic issues, such as the rejuvenation of rural livelihoods, regional development and regional self-sufficiency. Particularly in regard to bioenergy, both of these arguments have been criticised from numerous directions, making it a highly contested issue. Critical voices have emphasised the harmful environmental influences and regional inequalities caused by bioenergy production. Various interests concerning ecological effects, social equity or economic benefits frequently collide, creating a wide variety of perceptions, practices and conflicts.

Although renewable energy developments and governance are no longer novel phenomena, they have not received sufficient attention from academic researchers and the need for social scientific research continues to be evident. The majority of existing research concentrates on technical aspects and business development, while only a small number of researchers focus on social processes and impacts, governance issues or spatial aspects. We agree with those researchers who argue that energy decision making needs to be seen as embedded in material cultures, cognitive norms and energy practices, e.g. their spatial contexts, and take an approach that embraces policy circulation through multiple scales and local political as well as socio-economic behaviour.

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This special issue aims to fill in part of the gap by presenting articles that focus on renewable energy and the bioeconomy from various social scientific perspectives. Many of the articles approach policy-making as relationally interlinked, territorially embedded and geographically variegated hybrid process. Political decision making does not take place in a vacuum but is a much broader process of intermingling activities taking place at various spatial scales/levels and including a variety of other stakeholders who participate in political affairs.

Most of the articles focus on, in one way or another, the EU and its renewable energy policies. Although the growing importance of renewable energy is a global process, the EU has become a forerunner in renewable energy development and generated various policy tools to foster the shift of making energy systems less dependent on fossil fuels, which has had an impact beyond EU territoriality. The novel European-wide policy targets are implemented differently in each member state, which makes the policy making contentious and their actual contents geographically variable. The policies travel to different member states and variegated geographical contexts beyond EU territoriality and generate distinct political and economic processes when they are implemented nationally and locally. While the spatial processes of local translations and their resulting practices are of the utmost importance, the focus of this special issue is on the broader spatial processes that shape framework conditions, such as the employment of sustainability concepts (Lukkarinen), (trans-)national policy instruments (Albrecht & Rytteri; Sawatzky) or stakeholder perceptions and their dissemination along sustainability transition pathways (Trishkin et al.; Peltomaa & Kolehmainen).

The special issue starts with Jani Lukkarinen's article, which employs a scalar politics approach to evaluate the processes of rescaling that are related to the inclusion of biomass sustainability criteria within the EU renewables framework development. Based on an analysis of policy and stakeholder documents, his paper displays the role of rescaling processes within environmental governance, scrutinises central scalar issues and engages with how stakeholders employ various scalar framings for their purposes. The paper highlights three scalar categories; spatial, temporal and jurisdictional, that stand out in the policy processes surrounding EU biomass sustainability criteria. The rescaling processes described in the paper highlight the complexity of bioenergy and environmental governance and the role of scalar mismatches, as well as the mobilisation of certain scalar aspects that hinder a smoother integration of ambitious sustainability criteria in EU legislation. It highlights rescaling processes as a partially problematic, yet unavoidable aspect of policy translation and materialisation.

The complexity of policy translation processes is also the focus of the second contribution by Moritz Albrecht and Teijo Rytteri. However, their account is framed by a conceptualisation of policy failure exemplified through a particular case of policy translation, namely the Finnish government's Act on Energy Support for Low-Grade Timber. Following a thorough review of the concepts of complexity theory and policy failure within mobile policy contexts, they highlight the relationality of the Finnish political system within the wider socio-economic so-called forest industrial super system in Finland and its effects on policy translation. In this contribution, the unexpected interlinkages within and among policy systems, variegated path-dependencies and disruptive processes are highlighted as triggers for mismatches and instability in the system, and which ultimately led to policy failure. Hence, policy failure in this particular case is attributed to a simplified understanding of the political system by translating entities. This finding, reflected throughout this special issue in various facets, further highlights the need to integrate the complex and heterogeneous processes within the translation of mobile policy, so often neglected by normative, linear or best-practice based accounts, to understand the underlying processes of governance.

Biomass based policies, such as the EU's RED or its bioeconomy strategy, have to be treated not merely as an energy/bioeconomy policy but also as a resource policy that reaches beyond EU territoriality due to resource flows or for the sake of expected improvements in local (non-EU) energy systems. Hence, own political efforts exist in other parts of the world as well, but also result from a combination of EU influence and national objectives. The third contribution by Matthew Sawatzky focuses on the example of Canada, where bioenergy policies are strongly affected by political and market pressures originating from the EU and its RED. The paper analyses the Comprehensive Economic and Trade Agreement (CETA) between Canada and the EU, Canadian domestic energy politics and Canadian bioenergy development as interconnected translation loops of policy translation and portrays the influence of EU policy on Canadian policy systems and vice versa. With a focus on path-

dependencies and path-creation tied to policy translation, the study stresses the importance of looking beyond sectoral restrictions to understand bioenergy governance and development in Canada. While portraying the relation between various policy systems, such as energy, climate change and national policy development in general, it also stresses the effect of a federal system based on distributed federal state powers and provincial authorities for the processes of bioenergy governance.

Similar to Canada, the development of renewable energy production has been relatively slow in other countries in spite of abundant biomass resources. While slow rates of development are often linked to the abundance of fossil resources and trade in these countries, as is the case in Russia and Canada, it is important to understand the perceptions of stakeholders on bioenergy and biomass potentials and their possibilities to fill in policy and development niches. In most cases this is closely linked to the complexity of governance processes. The fourth paper of this special issue by Maxim Trishkin, Eugene Lopatin and Olga Gavrilova focuses not so much on the spatial complexities as displayed throughout the previous contributions but on the perceptions of forest experts regarding the potentials of bioenergy for regional, forest-based economic development compared to other uses in the Republic of Karelia, Russia. Situated adjacent to the Russian-Finnish border, bioenergy development in the region remains underdeveloped despite biomass potentials and technical knowledge transfer from Finland. The paper presents an overview of forest-based biomass and bioenergy development in the Republic of Karelia paired with a quantitative analysis of current and future forest expert opinions on factors likely to affect the local economy. Portraying a growing importance for bioenergy in the future, the perceptions in the paper highlight interesting variations on a temporal scale between the experienced and expected attitudes of respondents. The article also displays a variety of barriers related to bioenergy development potentials which consequently remind us of the complexity of sustainable transition spaces and policy materialisation.

Finally, the extended commentary by Juha Peltomaa and Jari Kolehmainen moves beyond bioenergy policy and development towards its successor in the political and economic arenas, namely the bioeconomy. It provides a brief introduction to scientific conceptualisations of the bioeconomy and displays its political implementation in Finland before moving to its main purpose, an assessment of the portrayal of the bioeconomy in the Finnish media over the last decade. It presents the importance of scrutinising how and through whom emerging economic/political concepts, such as the bioeconomy, are made accessible to society and how this may shape the rationalities and pathways of the same concepts during materialisation processes in various forms, like consumer choices, politics or research funding.

As we argued above, there is a constant and increasing need for social scientific research focusing on processes and policies related to natural resources and their utilisation. Bioeconomy is one of the buzzwords of our time, and governments in Finland and elsewhere swear by it when they formulate economic strategies and design natural resource policies. However, the future may not be as sustainable and trouble-free as frequently portrayed by political and economic elites. Bioeconomy strategies are typically based on further intensification of resource utilisation, which will inevitably produce unsustainable practises and conflicts. The growing exploitation of natural resources will most likely create unexpected environmental effects, generate competition between different types of businesses (e.g. forestry vs. tourism), form unequal global interdependencies and cause countless other conflicts of interest locally, nationally and internationally. Instead of blind praise and promotion of the bioeconomy, there is a serious call for critical social scientific perspectives on, for instance, identifying, mapping and analysing conflicts and their transnational spatialities as well as scrutinising transnational and national governance systems and local conflict resolution methods related to natural resource use. We hope that the articles below provide some sources of inspiration and starting points for such research.