

Review

Environmental Degradation and Governance: Exploring the Connections

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Accepted 20 March 2020

Environmental governance is a concept used in environmental policy that consists of rules, structure, processes, and institutions that highlights how human should interact with environment. In the existing literature, there is a consensus among the scholars about the importance of the environmental governance that have huge effects on the improved environmental outcomes. It is observed that a sound process of environment governance may promote successful implementation of its regulatory framework. However, the plain objective of the paper is to re-examine the nexus between the process of governance and its effects on environmental outcomes. As regards to methodology, the paper has been written by reviewing and comparing the literature on environmental degradation, governance and its outcomes.

Key Words: Environmental Degradation; Governance; Outcomes

Cite this article as: Begum M (2020). Environmental Degradation and Governance: Exploring the Connections. Int. J. Polit. Sci. Develop. 8(3) 82-87

INTRODUCTION

Earlier studies have shown the nexus between the process of environmental governance and its outcomes. Any undesirable changes to the environment are perceived to be dangerous to the survival of humanity and environment. Therefore, it is argued for the emergence of effective environmental governance for sustainable management of natural resources and protection of environment. For doing so, it needs to introduce a transparent system for environmental governance, such as sound policies, and plans, and provide opportunities for citizens to share their perspectives in case of environmental policy design and its implementation (Jafari et al., 2012).

Operationalization of the Concepts

Environmental Degradation. As the global governance institution, the United Nations International Strategy for Disaster Reduction (UNISDR) highlights environmental degradation as the lessening of the limit of the earth to fulfill the requirement of social and environmental destinations, and needs. Jafari et al. (2012) defines environmental degradation as the declining situation of environment when the depletion of natural resources, such as air, water and soil are observed. Environmental degradation is a great challenge to ecosystem in most African countries that is attributed to failure of the process of governance (Nwafor, 2014). Environmental organizations and civil societies have often shown their expression of anger due to the losses of natural ecosystem. However, it is stressed for the solutions for

the current and the ensuing environmental degradation so that the process of governance could act as soothing balm to the pains of the aggrieved communities (Nwafor, 2014). For instance, in the case of ongoing bushfire 2019-2020, Australia has experienced for wildfire of 60,000 km, however, Australian citizens have expressed their disappointment about the process of environmental governance.

Environment always keeps changing over time due to some obvious natural reasons, and it also happens due to natural climate variability and also negative impacts caused by human beings, although tremendous scientific and technological developments have taken place for the protection of environment (Singh, 2009). It is noteworthy that environmental resources depletes very rapidly in many parts of the world, given the context, it is emphasized for the protection and conservation of natural resources, and highlights the importance of introducing sound environmental policies and programs (Singh, 2009). Without a sound environmental policy, current development strategies would not be sustainable; however challenges remain for the process of governance for maintaining a sustainable environment that is the single most important agenda across the world (Raven et al., 1998).

Chopra (2016) identified some underlying causes for the environmental degradation, such as unplanned urbanization and industrialization, high population growth rates, high rate of deforestation etc. However, environmental degradation refers to the depletion of quality and quantity of natural resources, and therefore, it needs to explore the current deteriorating conditions of environment. Further, it is argued for the various kinds of the human practices that act as important reason of environmental degradation (Chopra, 2016). The current dismal conditions of environment have created risks to human beings and to the future generation and environment as well. Chopra (2016) also illustrated that smoke discharged and noise radiated by the vehicles are one of the important driver of air and sound contamination, apart from that, unplanned urbanization and industrialization have helped to the deteriorating conditions of natural resources.

Governance. Governance refers to the relationships between a government and its citizens. Asian Development Bank (ADB) in its policy paper defines '*governance as the manner in which power is exercised in the management of a country's social and economic resources for development*' (ADB, 1995, para 4). This means how power and authority are exercised and distributed, how decisions are made, and to what extent citizens are able to participate in decision-making processes (Gunilla et al., 2012).

Good Governance. In defining good governance, ADB considered four basic elements, such as accountability, transparency, predictability and participation (ADB,

1995). United Nations Development Program (UNDP 1997) illustrates good governance as the five basic elements which were set out in the policy document entitled '*Governance for Sustainable Human Development*', such as (a) Transparency: it is based on the free flow of information, access to institutions, and effective information services to those who are concerned (b) Accountability: it is on the part of the responsibility of the government to be accountable to the public (c) Rule of Law: equal legal rights and its unbiased enforcement (d) Efficiency and Effectiveness: results for society through effective utilization of resources by state institutions and its processes, and (e) Participation: mediation of the different interests groups through which broad based consensus on policies and procedures are reached.

Environmental Governance. Environmental governance is the topic that has received a growing interest in the academic literature in the last few years. The term is used to describe the processes of decision-making how decisions are made, and carried out with respect to environment. However, good environmental governance is important for finding institutional solutions to any kind of current and future environmental threats. The key issues with respect to environmental governance relate to the political-economic structure and processes that institutions involved in environment management, which shapes the environmental outcomes (Lemos and Agrawal, no date). It is further added by saying that international conventions, national environmental regulatory framework, decision-making processes at the local level, regional and global institutions, and environmental NGOs are involved in the process of environmental governance (Lemos and Agrawal, no date).

Boer et al. (2003) point out the principles of environmental governance that refers to fairness, accountability, responsibility and transparency which are required for desired environmental outcomes. To them, *fairness* means to maintain the environmental interests of all groups, including the concerned authorities, developer/company, and relevant stakeholders. *Accountability* refers to the answerability of the concerned people or bodies to disclose and explain of their environmental actions. Effective communication and liability among the concerned people or bodies are prerequisites for accountability in the process. *Transparency* explains the ways how decisions or actions are taken, in this regard, transparent sharing of information and/or reporting in a transparent way on environmental activities are important. Finally, *responsibility* expresses the duty to protect the environment, which shows the obligation to take decisions, monitor and manage the activities. Given the scenario, it can be said that by combining of all of these four principles may directly promote good environmental

governance. If any one of the principles is not fulfilled in case of environmental actions, it may negatively impact on the environmental outcomes (Boer et al., 2003). However, environmental governance as a concept that often includes normative dimension of sustainability in the policy domain, which refers to processes and institutions through which societies make decisions regarding the environment (deLoë et al. 2009). For the desired outcomes, it needs effectiveness of strategies and measures for implementing environmental goals (Jeffrey, 2005).

Governance for Environmental Degradation

Sustainable development emphasizes economic growth and development for all, but environmentally sound and sustainable. Hence, countries need to adopt more integrated planning approach, and emphasizing on the participation and active role of the private sector and civil society along with a government system with greater accountability, transparency and delegation of authority and capacity at the different levels of local government (Rahman 2020). It is further pointed out that for desired outcomes, environmental governance process needs to incorporate a number of characteristics, such as participatory dialogue and deliberation among stakeholders, effective decision-making process, adoption of flexibility approach, inclusiveness, transparency in activities, institutionalized consensus-building practices, and a shift from hierarchy to heterarchy (Neil 2009).

Efficient utilization of natural resources should always be the important agenda of the climate risk countries in order to ensure quality of life for human being and to maintain a clean and green environment for sustainable development (Haseeb et al., 2018). Further, human life in the environmentally vulnerable and climate risk countries are badly affected by environmental degradation, such as different types of pollution, land degradation and other newly emerged environmental threats. Hence, managing the natural resources in an appropriate way should be an important agenda for the environmentally vulnerable countries. It is worth to mention that in the last three decades there has been great improvement in terms of environmental regulatory framework through the establishment of public agencies and commitments from the international environmental conventions. Despite of these initiatives, it is still evidently found a clear gap between the commitments made either at national or international level and the extent of implementation of policies or commitments for reaching out a desired environmental outcome.

Exploring the Connections between Good Environmental Governance and Environmental Outcomes

Many countries across the world suffer from the impacts of environmental degradation, especially poor countries are less capable of managing environmental degradation, as it is the beyond the capacities of them. The role of the governments in environmental protection is exercised mainly through long-term planning, in the form of introducing strategies, development plans and action plans, setting standards, and controlling compliance with regulatory framework (National Audit Office of Estonia, no date). However, legal instruments set guidelines and standards for the desired state of protecting environment. There are international environmental frameworks, for instance Kyoto protocol, available in order to address global environmental challenges.

When it comes to the plan of action at the national level with respect to limiting of environmental degradation, they are often not well integrated into national policy and decision-making processes in line with the approaches of international environmental framework (Gunilla et al., 2012). As a consequence, the failure of inclusion of international environmental framework into national level lead to environmental degradation, this creates pressures on society. Apart from that, it is added by arguing that the commitment of funding from the developments partners, including the World Bank (WB) is often supply-driven and fragmented, and the funders don't relate with the national systems of the climate fund recipient countries. Given the context, it is argued that for desired environmental outcomes, the political and economic systems of the fund recipient countries need to be developed to fully utilize external resources. On the other hand, applying collaborative governance framework, the international environmental framework must coordinate with national system in order to get better environmental outcomes (Gunilla et al., 2012).

Undoubtedly, absence of enforcement of environmental rules and regulations has further worsened the conditions. It is highlighted that powerful groups should not get any kind of opportunities in damaging natural resources (Rahman 2020), in practice, powerful business groups are always against any new policies with respect to reducing industrial pollution. It is argued that who are grabbing land, wetlands and forest resources illegally and destroying natural resources must be punished in the existing legal framework (Rahman, 2020). Environmental organizations and civil society organizations always put pressure for protecting and conserving natural resources and pollution control. It is also emphasized accountability and transparency that must work constantly to demand for better environmental outcomes. Furthermore, it is argued that ensuring the right to access to information,

citizens' active participation are focused as the instrumental value for environmental governance (Gunilla et al., 2012), thus citizen's participation and involvement is assumed to lead a higher degree of desired environmental outcomes.

It is important to involve different stakeholders and interest groups in the decision making process to ensure that all important environmental issues are considered and policies are built on comprehensive understanding of stakeholders (National Audit Office of Estonia, no date). For achieving desired environmental outcomes, countries need to introduce environmental democracy. For instance, principle 10 of the Rio Declaration (1992) promotes democracy in the environmental arena and attempts to reduce the barriers of access to information through enhancing citizens' active participation in the decision-making process. It is further pointed out that the principle focuses on multi-stakeholder partnership which connects to the both state and non-state actors, such as governments, international organizations and civil society organizations. This partnership may work as watchdog to facilitate for the proper environmental management which can protect natural resources and to hold the government in order to meet their duties for environmental protection.

It is of worth to note that having reviewed different literature, it is found various inconsistent arguments with respect to community participation for environmental outcomes. However, community participation is generally suggested for a quality decision-making, integrating local knowledge and wisdom, and the inclusion of perspectives from local actors, which can increase the high rate of acceptance and proper implementation of decisions (Edelenbos et al., 2011).

For countries, successful environmental action must proceed with a continuous attempt in the process, if they want to achieve better environmental outcomes. In the earlier research, it has been reflected that accountability and transparency of any government actions, public participation and integrity reduce the risks of corrupt practices and build trust over the environmental agencies which promote successful implementation of policy and programs. Furthermore, desired environmental outcomes are not only dependent on the existing legal framework of a country and the capacities of the concerned public agencies, but also largely on the commitment and support of the government that play a catalyst role in creating an enabling environment.

Many countries in the world now face negative climate effects and the escalating environmental degradation that has become a challenging issue to society. The literature on environment increasingly promotes collaborative and participatory form of governance to a more sustainable policy framework (Jens and Oliver 2009). Therefore, it is now increasingly emphasized to introduce participatory process of governance, for instance, Plummer et al. (2017) stressed that involvement of relevant stakeholder

are associated with the development of deliberative and decision making processes, which increases efficiency and effectiveness in environment management. They further added by saying that increasing participation and involvement of stakeholder in the policy processes in the complex environmental areas have now become an embedded issue in policy domains (Plummer et al., 2017).

The United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) were held in 1992 that focused on the capacities of the government and environmental agencies for the protection of natural resources. However, government design and implement environmental policies and programs, but it needs to make relationship and interactions with local actors involved in the policy process. The government should adopt the policy guideline on inclusion of local stakeholders by providing them access to information, thus democratic practices could be further strengthened by bringing the government closer to the local people. In this process, public participation in decision-making process at the local level may promote to increased transparency, accountability and the protection of unheard voices about the process of environmental governance (Tulia, 2010).

Environmental monitoring has a role in controlling compliance with environmental regulations (National Audit Office of Estonia, no date). Local government bodies are responsible at local level for implementing all the relevant environmental aspects within the legislative framework (Van, 2001). For assessing environmental outcomes, local government also needs to evaluate the potential adverse consequences that have impacts on environment (Blaine, 2000). Given the context, the participation and involvement of local government bodies in the affairs of environmental governance is increasingly recognized. Furthermore, many developed countries in the world have now adopted a decentralization approach in managing their natural resources through enhancing people's participation at the local level. Undoubtedly, decentralized roles and responsibilities given to the local government must provide sufficient resources in environmental management.

Political commitment must demonstrate the support to the conservation and protection of natural resources; only then environmental governance will be strengthened (Rahman, 2020). However, countries differ in their governance mechanisms due to varying nature of institutional performance. Given the scenario, a contextualized and systematic study in a country may facilitate to properly address the required steps which should be followed for the desired environmental outcomes. For doing so, capacity building of the relevant stakeholders involved on formulating strategic environmental plan is very important for achieving better environmental outcomes.

It is also noteworthy to mention that it is essentially required for improving capacity for internal governance within the agencies involved in the protection of natural resources (Rahman, 2015). However, capacity is defined as improving the ability of individuals and organizations to perform functions in a sustainable manner (UNDP, 2008). It is commonly argued that capacity building of the relevant stakeholders may promote the development and implementation of environment policy and programs.

CONCLUSION

Environmental governance has been evolved hoping that this may improve the conditions of environmental degradation that many countries across the world now face. The concept assists us how to provide institutional support and processes in responding to environmental degradation and its future threats, and also explains how to manage and regulate policy and programs with efficiency and effectiveness. However, this paper has illustrated the concept of environmental governance, which is relevant to the achievement of desired environmental outcomes. Good environmental governance is significant factor for sustainable development, which is targeted by the UN for member states. Implementation of environmental measures and regulatory framework has not been successful in the past in many environmentally degraded and climate risk countries. However, environmental governance is a specific form of broader governance that relates to the regulatory structure and processes and institutions involved in environmental management through which political actors' recover from the negative effects of environmental degradation.

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