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Inter-organizational collaboration in territorial development projects : a multi-scalar approach

ABSTRACT

This paper is derived from the ambition to analyze inter-organizational collaboration in so-called bottom-up projects. These projects have the particularity to be conducted by extremely diverse groups of actors, and the theory of boundary object lends itself very well to their comprehension. However, it doesn't allow to consider the different levels of context that impact the projects. We propose to combine it with a regulation approach, in order to take into account the meso and macro articulations and constraints. We proceed by a comparative and multilevel case study of : 1/ a French cluster in the field of eco construction (PTCE), 2/ an emerging Natural Park in Mexico. Our findings overcome monocausal explanations and provide insights in the contradictions between the local institutional arrangements of the projects and the meso and macro institutional mechanisms.

KEYWORDS

Inter-organizational collaboration, territory, bottom-up, boundary object, regulation

INTRODUCTION

Public policy elaboration, influenced by the recent evolutions of theoretical fields such as human geography, management or territorial economy refers more and more to the concept of *bottom-up* projects. *Top down* projects have been charged with being both too much driven by public institutions and out of touch with reality. *Bottom-up* initiatives have been conversely valued for their supposed local and participative property. In other words, this kind of territorial development projects has been conceived as a way to efficiently fulfill local needs by using a participative approach. Such initiatives are conducted by extremely diverse groups of actors - institutional actors, activists, scholars, NPOs - and have the particularity to require collaboration of different social worlds. Thus, the actors have to find solutions to deal with

heterogeneity. They have to create common understanding and shared meaning. However, in many cases, so-called territorial development projects were initially driven by a public or semi-public structure and hardly ever succeeded in enabling multi-actors collaboration.

In this paper, territorial development projects are analyzed through the theoretical framework of boundary objects (Star, Griesemer, 1989). This theory is useful for understanding the production of common representation and for explaining inter-organizational collaboration (IOC). Yet, it lacks tools for considering the different levels of context that influence them. In other words, when analyzing inter-organizational dynamics, the theory of boundary objects is worth being combined with a broader theory which may help encompass the exterior constraints that impact projects. Regulation approach meets these preoccupations since it allows us to consider territorial development projects as meso-systems, embedded in a regime of accumulation, and to understand the institutional arrangements as well as to question the meso-macro dialectic. This means our contribution emphasizes the fact that micro, meso and macro levels matter when IOC processes are brought back into scope.

The research design of the paper is based on a comparison between two territorial development projects. One of them is a territorial cluster of economic cooperation (PTCE), which aims at structuring and developing eco-construction sector in the French departments of Hautes-Alpes and Alpes de Haute Provence. The other is an emerging Mexican national park in Jalisco. Both of them are recent, considered as bottom-up initiatives, but show serious limits in keeping actors involved. The outline of the paper is, 1/ to present an original framework mixing the theory of boundary objects with the regulation approach for territorial development projects analysis ; 2/ to describe detail the two case studies' processes by combining a boundary object perspective of making common sense and a multi-scalar observation of collaboration and its limits.

A BOUNDARY OBJECT APPROACH OF MAKING COMMON SENSE

The concept of boundary object was originally proposed to explain collaboration and conciliation of different viewpoints in scientific work. Star and Griesemer (1989) first analyzed the history of the Museum of Vertebrate Zoology at the University of California, with the ambition to examine how the tension created by heterogeneity among the actors involved was managed. The model they propose differs from the Callon-Latour-Law one, by replacing the Obligatory Passage Point with other kind of translations. They retain two methods in order to ensure collaboration across divergent social worlds : standardized methods and boundary

objects. We only focus on boundary objects, because of the characteristics of territorial development projects : they don't have sufficient routine work to map their processes. Boundary objects are described as : « *objects which are both plastic enough to adapt to local needs and the constraints of the several parties employing them, yet robust enough to maintain a common identity across sites.* »(Star & Griesemer, 1989). In other words, they both inhabit several intersecting social worlds and satisfy the informational requirements of each of them. Three components to boundary objects are particularly outlined : interpretive flexibility, the material structure of different types of boundary objects, the question of scale . The authors distinguish four forms of boundary objects : a repository, which takes the form of a set of modular things, ideal types, coincident boundaries and standardized forms. Many scholars have worked on the figure of boundary spanner, the one that relates practices of different fields. To a certain extent, this figure could be assimilated to the Callon and Latour's translator (1981), but has the particular interest to highlight the distinction between nomination and enactment (Levina, Vast, 2005). While some boundary spanners and boundary objects are simply nominated or designed to perform certain roles, others are « in practice» or « in use», in the sense that they are engaged or deployed in spanning boundaries separating fields.

The concept of boundary object has been important to recent contributions that have highlighted the role of translation between divergent viewpoints (Granjou, Mauz, 2009), especially in CSCW literature (Lutters & Ackerman, 2006) but so far have neglected the consideration of other levels of context. In particular, the current conceptualization of boundary objects seems insufficient to describe how IOC comes to happen or on the contrary why it doesn't as part of territorial development projects. Existing theories of collaboration fall short of explaining the embeddedness of scales that generates complex processes in this kind of projects. Those studying IOC through a single theoretical lens have tended to stay focused on issues that are defined as significant within their community of scholars (Cropper & al, 2008) However, in order to analyze better the complexity of processes, the boundaries of theories being used to investigate IOC have began to intrude each other. It is precisely what we propose to undertake for understanding IOC in territorial development projects. Thus, in the next part, we build upon regulation approach to highlight the articulation of the different scales that influence the projects.

A REGULATION APPROACH OF INTER-ORGANIZATIONAL COLLABORATION

The regulation theory was initially developed in the early 70s to explain economic instability and stagflation in France. Boyer (1990) defines it as follows : «*The study of the transformation of social relations, which creates new forms- both economic and non-economic- organized in structures and reproducing a determinate structure, the mode of reproduction*». This model offers two principal concepts. While regime of accumulation is used to analyze the way production organizes and expands capital (Fordism for instance), mode of regulation refers to channeling of behaviors and reproduction of institutional forms. The main institutional forms are : the institutional money form, the competition form, the wage form, the state form, and the international regime (Boyer, 1986).

In this contribution, we prefer talking about territorial regulation and don't build upon regulation theory as conceptualized originally but rather on the recent contributions that focused on meso-macro dialectic. According to Dutertre and Laurent (2008) :«*Territorial regulation results from the necessity to regulate conditions through which sectors are developed and resources are assigned*». More specifically, in order to analyze IOC in territorial development projects, regulation approach allows to examine how institutional compromises are established. These projects deal with sustainable development and so can be interpreted as resistances to the regime of accumulation. The actors involved show willingness to « change the rules», and to set new norms on their territory, whether their intention is to develop new economic practices or to protect the environment.

METHODOLOGY, DATA COLLECTION

In this research, we seek to overcome monocausal explanations and monolevel analysis in the comprehension of IOC. Thus, the case study method lends itself very well to the comparative analysis of two territorial development projects. Indeed, our research question deals with complexity and process analysis of interactions and dependences, which are the main subjects of this method (Wacheux, 1996). We are convinced that an approach in terms of levels of analysis is both structuring and heuristic, and remains all too rare in management sciences (Lecocq, 2012). We used an abductive approach in thus study, relying on transcripts from semistructured, in-depth interviews with the actors of our two field sites : representatives and members involved in the projects, inhabitants of the territories covered by the projects and whose activities are concerned, and public actors who participate to the elaboration of local or national public policy. We conducted a total of 42 interviews : 28 for the first case and 14 for

the second one. The first case study is based on our doctoral thesis realized in France¹ while the second one is issued from a research project in Mexico : Mi Sierra², in which we participated for a four-month study of tourism sector. Additional data sources included internally generated presentations, reports³, maps, and meeting notes.

The two cases are 1/ a French territorial cluster of economic cooperation (PCTE) and 2/ an emerging natural Park in Mexico (Paisaje Biocultural).

1/ In France, a PTCE is characterized by the union of social economy organizations, « classic » SME, local authorities and investigation centers for a local and sustainable project. The model was created in 2013 with an interministerial call for projects which selected 23 clusters in the country. PTCE eco construction is one of them and aims at structuring wood, straw, stone and clay filieres in departments of Hautes-Alpes and Alpes de Haute Provence. This cluster is managed by an «employment area committee», which is a french instance of broadened social dialog, and comes from an institutional diagnostic of region PACA. After the end of the public funding period, it is supposed to be autonomous, and managed by the local actors, members of the cluster's organizations.

2/ Paisaje Biocultural in Sierra Occidental de Jalisco region of Mexico, also deals with a new institutional figure. It was created as part of french-mexican international cooperation and aims at experimenting a new way of protecting the environment while developing local economy.

Regarding our research question, these case choices appear particularly interesting. We made the effort to choose particular cases precisely because they are special in the sense of allowing us to gain certain insights that other cases would not be able to provide (Siggelkow, 2007). First, they illustrate very well initiatives supposed to be bottom-up but elaborated as public policy program. They also have the particularity to gather extremely diverse group of actors, which leads to an always negotiated IOC. Then, they deal with two innovating projects, which purpose is both territorial development and establishment of new norms. Lastly,

¹« La coopération territoriale comme processus structurant de l'émergence d'éco-filières : le cas de deux PTCE de la région PACA », Céline Bourbousson, LEST

²« Miradas e Investigaciones sobre la Sierra Occidental », research project lead by CEMCA and MNHN (Serge Bahuchet, Anouck Bessy and Delphine Mercier) and based on Anouck Bessy's doctoral thesis : « La gouvernance locale et les usages de la biodiversité par les populations dans le corridor Ameca-Manantlan, Jalisco, Mexique »

³ For instance, Bessy A., Sulmont A., Mercier D., Bahuchet S., 2014, *2^{do} informe del proyecto de investigación MI SIERRA. Gobernanza y usos de la biodiversidad en la Sierra Occidental de Jalisco*, <https://halshs.archives-ouvertes.fr/halshs-01216479>

these initiatives are embedded in two different macro contexts (France and Mexico), which allows us to question meso-macro dialectic overcoming national specificities.

COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF MAKING COMMON SENSE

In our two cases, we can identify a great diversity of boundary objects, used to create a common language between the different categories of stakeholders and social worlds. In this part, we describe the two more relevant ones and begin to analyze their similitude and their role. For PTCE eco matériaux, **eco construction method** takes on great importance and can be interpreted as a boundary object, enough to adapt to needs of each group of actors. *The architects* consider eco construction method as an opportunity to use new materials and see it as a way to improve the energy efficiency index. Among them, we can notice a difference of appropriation of the notion. Some of them consider the local origin of the materials used as a priority whereas others get them from other regions. For *the militants*, eco construction method means respect of the planet and is also a way to satisfy self production needs. For instance, one of the most involved actor of this group is interested in eco construction because he considers it as an alternative to conventional industry of construction. He organized activism for years to denounce pollution and danger for health that this industry implies and eco-construction is a way for him to combat this industry, proposing a « green » alternative. For *Work Integration Social Enterprises (WISEs)*, the meaning of eco construction method is very different as they see it as a source of employment. The biggest and most institutionalized WISE push the case for a large definition of eco construction, that wouldn't focus on the local origin of the materials but rather the potential of economic activity it would generate. *Public institutions* also share this perception but are more interested in the opportunity to reduce the local electricity consuming, that is very high in PACA despite of the clement weather. Thus, eco construction method can be interpreted as a coincident boundaries object (the third form of boundary object described by Star and Griesemer in their founding paper) since it has the same boundaries for each group - use of eco materials to improve energy efficiency -, but different internal contents - each group has its own criteria regarding which material or precise method is part of eco construction.

Regarding our second case, Paisaje Biocultural, the most significant and used boundary object is the **label**. With the creation of this new model of natural Park, a label will be elaborated, on the model of french parcs naturels régionaux. *Local producers* see it as a way to certify their production and benefit from a better promotion. For the *town halls* of the three villages concerned by the project, the label is an opportunity to encourage local production and

consume and so to create economic activity. Then, *actors of touristic sector* consider the label as a way to promote the region. For them, it aims at constructing an identity in the territory. This group of actors is the privileged interlocutor of the project. Thereby, they have more influence than the others on the material structure of the boundary object and tend to project their own conventions on it.

FIRST SCALE OF ANALYSIS : ILLEGITIMATE BOUNDARY OBJECTS AND ISOLATION OF BOUNDARY SPANNERS

Two elements contribute to explain local difficulties, in the two cases, to enable IOC. First, boundary objects used to enhance collaboration have been designated within the framework of institutional initiatives, but still have not been appropriated by local actors. In the PTCE eco-construction, it results in the difficulties of the actors to agree on eco construction definition and to get involved for concrete actions, while in Paisaje Biocultural, it implies a differentiated involvement between touristic actors and the others. Then, boundary spanners also lack legitimacy. In PTCE éco-matériaux, the boundary spanners are the “employment area committee” employees. Their job entails developing the production, transformation, distribution and use of local eco materials. Towards this end, they have to join together the actors of each material and scale, to make them inventing new ways of working together. They manage a three-years-national grant which is supposed to unite stakeholders and strengthen the sector. However, they lament the fact that the actors don’t get involved. The director comments : « *I come from north of France and there I used to assist the elaboration of Agendas 21, it wasn’t easy but people understood and got involved. Here it’s “every man for himself” culture.* » The boundary spanners have trouble establishing a consensus and a common comprehension at the boundary between local producers and public institutions. Their speech, due to their former professional experience, is better fitted and familiar to public stakeholders than to farmers or artisans. One of them mentions explicitly : « *we are not in the same world* ». This lack of legitimacy for the boundary spanners is also an obstacle for Paisaje Biocultural in Mexico. Indeed, most of the employees used to work together in CONAFOR (national forestal commission), which promoted Paisaje Biocultural but hadn’t succeeded in gaining the trust of local actors.

Those explanations are interesting and relevant to examine why the nominated boundary spanners, in our two cases, have a hard time establishing a common language between the different groups of stakeholders. However, it would be simplistic to explain the local difficulties of IOC in the two cases without considering the contexts. We overcome the mono causal explanations in the following part by drawing on the regulation approach.

SECOND SCALE OF ANALYSIS : MESO AND MACRO TENSIONS

The two cases we study are local initiatives to create new territorial regulations. The french PTCE aims to develop new practices in terms of construction and employment while Paisaje Biocultural invents new ways of protecting natural resources and developing economic activity. In order to set these institutional arrangements, the actors involved in the projects have created boundary objects. Yet, their efficiency depends on a certain consistency between the different levels of context. Precisely, regulation approach permits to consider the embeddedness of the projects in various levels of context. The main institutional forms (Boyer, 1986) that interact and influence IOC are :the competition form, the international regime and the state form.

First, meso-analysis allowsto enlighten some obstacles that affect IOC. In France, the construction sector is dominated by big companies, which have used conventional and polluting materials. They are also very present in the certifying committee for materials (CSTB) and defend their interests. The PTCE eco-construction joins together activities using materials that are not certified, and so propose new conventions that are in contradiction with the institutional mechanisms of the sector. Moreover, national educative system doesn't value eco construction : knowledge and methods in this field lack capitalization. In Paisaje Biocultural, the touristic dimension is very important. However, tourism is one of the most influent industry in the country and it is precisely mass tourism that is promoted and sustained, while Paisaje Biocultural proposes ecotourism.

International competition also has an obvious influence on IOC. For instance in France, importations of wood from Eastern Europe have substituted for local wood because of very cheaper prices due to a modern production tool. In Mexico, tourism has been impacted by the recent increasing of international cheap destinations and its companies struggle to keep their market share. In the territory of Paisaje Biocultural, some big touristic companies have had an aggressive strategy, monopolizing most of the activity by organizing tours in the villages of the project.

CONCLUSION

In both cases, our results show the contractions between a territorial dynamic and its environment's one. (Gilly, Pecqueur, 2002). Indeed, this paper illustrates a typical situation. The situation when the innovations thought in the territories, with the help of boundary objects -used to facilitate IOC- need, to develop and be effective, the split of institutional

forms of national economic system. Yet, these innovations are local and don't have the potential to spread and transform the existing regime of accumulation and mode of regulation.

To understand why so-called bottom-up projects hardly ever succeeded in enabling IOC, it is useful to analyze creation or use of boundary objects, but also to consider the embeddedness of these local regulation initiatives in different scales of context. Thereby, it allows a whole understanding of processes involved in the establishment of institutional local compromises. This invites us to explore a question at the heart of regulationist problems : the important issue of determining the local conditions of recomposition of the accumulation regime. This questioning is part of the debate (local/global) opened and structured by three collections of essays (Storper, Scot, 1992, Benko, Dunford, 1991, Benko, Lipietz, 1992).

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