

Institutional Responses to Environmental Change

William Clark

Kennedy School of Government

Harvard University

Perspectives on Social Learning: How societies have grappled with global environmental risks

- Comparative history of 10 countries, 35 yrs
- Interaction of science, policy, management
- Special attention to the role of scientific assessments and their organization
- International team of scholars, practitioners

Perspectives on Social Learning: Embedded in the wider literature

- Karl Deutsch “The nerves of government”
- Hugh Heclo “Modern social politics...”
- Paul Sabatier “Policy change and learning”
- Kai Lee “Compass and gyroscope”
- Holling et al., “Barriers and bridges...”
- NRC “Our common journey...”

What have we learned about social learning?

- Who learns?
- What is learned?
- What counts as learning?
- How does learning occur?
- Why is learning so rare?

Who learns?

- Individuals (not societies) learn ...
- But they do so within social groupings...
 - Advocacy coalitions (Sabatier)
 - Epistemic communities (Haas)
 - Issue networks (Sikkink and Keck)
- With formal organizations serving more to *remember* lessons than to learn them.

What is learned?

- Conventional focus on...
 - New scientific findings
 - Results of trial-and-error experience
- Increasing attention to (trans-national) learning of...
 - Norms and goals
 - Alternative issue “framings” (Hall on Keynes)
- But *not* of local implementation strategies.

What counts as learning?

- Not just responding to experience
- Not just “changing your mind”
- No presumption it yields “better” outcomes
- Rather....
 - Critical reflection (analysis, not just analogy) ...
 - Sustained over policy-relevant periods (>10yrs)... and
 - Focused on using information to produce cognitive change in formulation of issues and options.

How does learning occur?

- Information doesn't just flow but is...
- “Pushed” (supplied) by would-be teachers advocating particular lessons;
- “Pulled” (demanded) by would-be learners, dissatisfied with the present state of affairs;
- Therefore born political, suspected of bias..
- Requiring brokers (negotiators) to help balance *credibility, saliency, legitimacy*.

Why is learning so rare?

- Its unwanted...
 - Most people, organizations don't want to learn what they should be doing differently as much as they want to defend what they've done....
- Its hard to do well...
 - Requires sustained interaction, building of trust
- Its no one's job...
 - Need to create organizations at the boundary of science and politics, dedicated to facilitating social learning.

Further information...

- Social Learning Group. 2001. *Learning to manage global environmental risks* (MIT Press; <http://www.ksg.harvard.edu/sl>)
- Global Environmental Assessment Project. 2001. *Conclusions and case studies.* (<http://environment.harvard.edu/gea>)
- Initiative on Science and Technology for Sustainability (<http://sustainabilityscience.org>)
- William_Clark@harvard.edu.