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Veröffentlichungsversion / Published Version
Zeitschriftenartikel / journal article

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Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Gauthier, C., & Bogdan, A.-M. (2021). Collective Decisions Towards Sustainability: Insights From Local Collaboration in Canada and Lobbying in the EU. *easy_social_sciences*, 66, 30-40. <https://doi.org/10.15464/easy.2021.004>

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Collective Decisions Towards Sustainability

Insights From Local Collaboration in Canada and Lobbying in the EU

Claire Gauthier & Ana-Maria Bogdan

Besides representative mechanisms, democratic decision-making entails the participation of individuals, communities, and organizations. However, in complex and modern societies, the implications of these multiple interactions are difficult to map and evaluate. Social network analysis allows us to scrutinize the decision-making process and its outcomes in terms of effectiveness, fairness, and legitimacy. We present two different cases dealing with decision-making in the context of sustainability. By looking at the patterns of interactions, we can identify the most relevant actors and explain why they are important, as well as describe the composition, structure, and evolution of a network to explain certain outcomes. The results offer empirical insights, which challenge common perceptions and provide practical solutions for decision-makers to maintain or improve good governance.

Keywords: governance, participation, multi-level, sustainability, collaboration, lobbying, social network analysis

Why is Input From Stakeholders Important?

Governments aim to represent and make collective decisions in the general interest of the people who voted for them. However, governments also rely on participatory mechanisms for policy success. First, policy-makers require input from people and organizations “on the ground” to ensure that policies are based on accurate, relevant, and comprehensive information. Second, to successfully implement policies, governments require sufficient support from stakeholders and interest groups. Hence, they need to identify potential resistance and clarify the benefits of specific

policy proposals, and if required, adjust these by aligning different interests.

As a result, while the traditional way of collective decision-making has been centralized around directly elected governments, other forms of collective decision-making have become more prevalent in recent decades (Bevir, 2012; Hooghe & Marks, 2003). On the one hand, we have seen a transfer of responsibilities and powers from central governments to both local and regional governments (top-down) and to international institutions (bottom-up), such as the European Union (EU). A central idea that guides these newer governance models is the *principle of subsidiarity*, which refers to shifting decision-making power to the lowest possible level of governance. On the other hand, we have also witnessed the

inclusion of many non-governmental actors in the decision-making process. This form of governance is believed to increase participation and promote more equitable and efficient forms of management and development. It requires individuals and groups to cooperate on specific issues (e. g., by building a common front or resolving conflicting views through the negotiation of trade-offs). Such an approach has been especially encouraged in areas related to natural resource management (Ribot, 2003; Bodin & Crona, 2009) and to address criticism of a democratic deficit in the EU (Georgakakis & De Lassalle 2012).

Hence, understanding the interactions among stakeholders is crucial for understanding how decisions are made and which decisions are reached. Governing processes can involve attending meetings (where actors exchange information), trying to convince each other of solutions, or transferring resources. The multi-dimensionality of these interactions has made the mapping of the decision-making processes increasingly difficult. However, knowing who takes an active part in these decisions and how these actors put forward their ideas and interests has become increasingly important from a transparency, fairness, and legitimacy point of view.

Such interactions can be studied through social network analysis (SNA). SNA has three main advantages: (1) SNA can be used to identify key stakeholders or powerful groups; (2) it helps understand the extent to which stakeholders influence the outcome of a policy or decision; and (3) it can supplement the shortcomings of stakeholder analysis. To illustrate its relevance, we consider two very different cases.

The first case concerns a local-level natural resource management network among three Canadian communities. This network seeks to find solutions and share experiences dealing with regional sustainability challenges in three Canadian river deltas. This procedure would be an example of a decentralized governance approach. This case is informed by the research work led and published by Steelman

and colleagues (2021).

The second case focuses on the consultation processes of actors in formulating EU policies on climate and energy issues. It is an example of a more centralized approach to governance at the EU level to illustrate its pluralistic and multi-level governance model. The study of power struggles in policy formulation has important political implications for the energy transition. The results presented here are part of an ongoing Ph.D. project.

Case 1: Local Governance and the Delta Dialogue Network

Our first case focuses on three Canadian inland deltas (i.e., the Slave River Delta, the Peace-Athabasca Delta, and the Saskatchewan River Delta; Figures 1 and 2) and the collaboration among partners involved in local environmental governance initiatives in the deltas. These Canadian rivers and inland deltas are regional biodiversity hotspots. They historically provided a rich habitat for wildlife and have contributed to sustaining the livelihoods of people located in the nearby communities. However, many developments—such as the construction of dams on nearby rivers, mining activities in the Oil Sands Region, expansion of the agricultural area, and climate change in general—have harmed these water bodies and the nearby communities. In each community, members partnered with local government representatives and academics to develop and implement practices to manage water resources sustainably. The initiatives were focused on monitoring the health status of the rivers and deltas (e.g., “Is the local fish healthy and safe to consume?”), and on answering community-driven questions related to ensuring sustainable development for their communities and minimizing the impact of human activities on the environment (e.g., “Will there be less moose because of habitat changes?”).

Figure 1 The three inland deltas and the dams placed on the Slave River, the Peace River, and the North and South Saskatchewan Rivers (Steelman et al., 2021)



Figure 2 Area of the Oil Sands Mining encompassing portions of the Peace and the Athabasca Rivers (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Oil_sands)



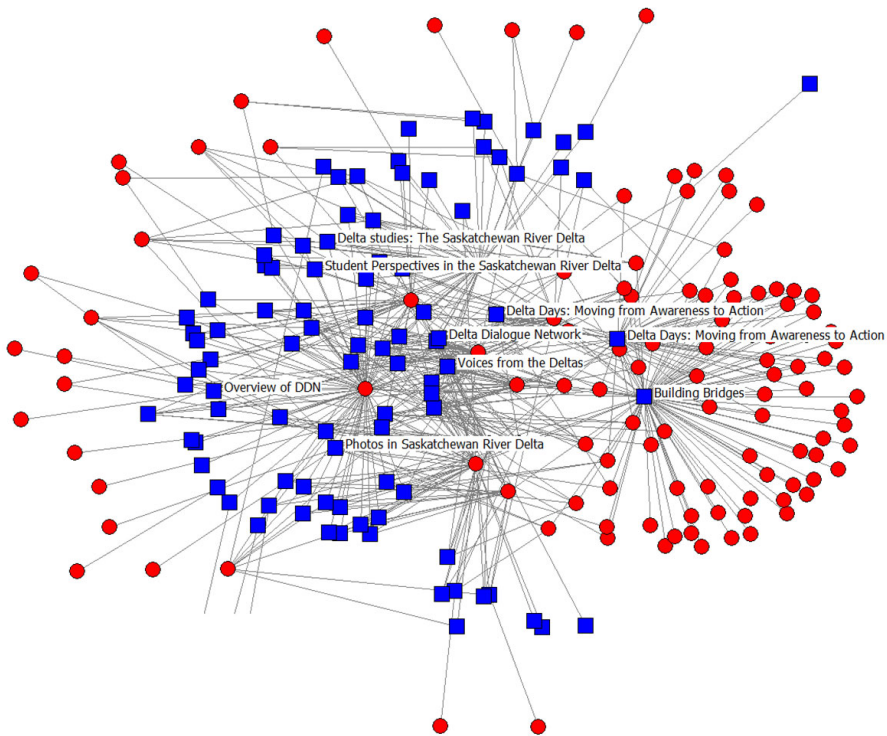
Although local community-driven governance partnerships were initially formed in each delta, these three groups were later connected by researchers at the University of Saskatchewan and community representatives. Seeing similarities in the types of sustainability issues they were trying to solve within their deltas and the potential for learning from each other, the communities soon realized the benefits of working together. As a result, a group of partners already started collaborating in 2011 across these three regions. This initiative, called the Delta Dialogue Network (DDN), was originally developed by researchers at the University of Saskatchewan. It included activities aimed at identifying issues that required attention and guiding the knowledge-sharing process among its members. Formalized in 2014, one of the DDN's main objectives was to bring together a variety of partners, including (1) community partners, most of them Indigenous communities; (2) local, territo-

rial, and federal government staff; and (3) students and professors from collaborating universities. Its role was to help coordinate the collaboration between them. The DDN had its own management group consisting of community representatives from the three deltas who oversaw the work and a research advisory group composed of researchers and community representatives.

Research objective and data. Collaborating activities included meetings, events, reports, and publications among the DDN partners. These interactions were documented and later used to evaluate how successful the DDN collaboration was in achieving intermediary goals of connecting diverse partners and eventually helping to develop regional-scale sustainable solutions. Hence, the core research questions were: *Did the DDN manage to engage diverse partners across these three regions and enable them to voice their different concerns and interests? How did the roles of these partners evolve over time?*

What was the contribution of activities in bringing partners together? To answer this question, we focus on the recorded activities among partners within the first four years of the DDN, between 2014 and 2017. In total, the DDN partners took part in over 300 different activities, ranging from community meetings and presentations to conferences and written works. Figure 3 shows the links between the major activities (the blue squares) and the DDN members (the red circles). The lines represent whether certain members participated in specific activities. In SNA, such a social network is called a two-mode network because participation links can only exist between one mode of nodes (the partners) and the other mode of nodes (the events). What Figure 3 shows is that some activities were good for bringing many partners together to exchange success stories or knowledge. Other types of

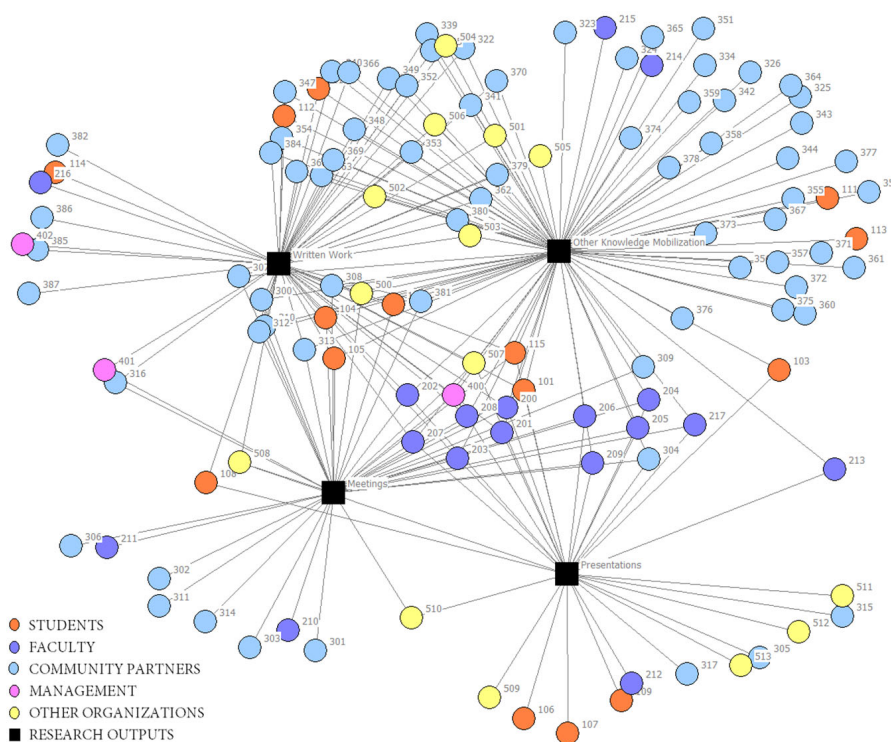
Figure 3 Activities the DDN partners collaborated on between 2014 and 2017



events were better for bringing together fewer but more diverse groups, enabling a discussion of diverging viewpoints.

What role did activity types play, and how relevant were different partners?

Figure 4 The DDN by activity types and by type of member between 2014-2017

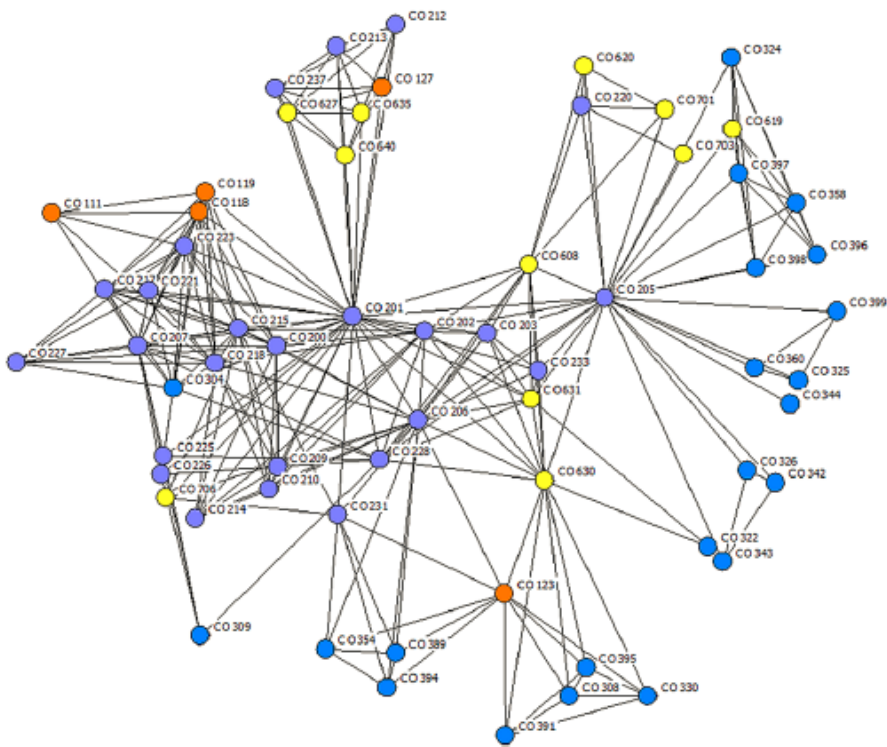


In a second step, we merged specific activity types (from Figure 3) into 4 groups (written work, meetings, presentations, and other knowledge mobilization) to identify which types of actors were involved in each of these events. The four squares in Figure 4 represent the four types of activities. We also distinguished between the kind of partners by using different colors for the circles. As Figure 4 shows, those involved in many activities tended to be academics (faculty indicated in purple and students in orange). Most community partners (blue) were only involved in one single type of event.

How did the role of different partners evolve over time? Another way to consider such network data is to transform the original two-mode network (Figure 3) into a network between partners. In this case, the presence of a tie between two partners indicates whether these two partners participated in the same event, which can be considered as a collaboration among partners. This is called a one-mode network since ties exist among partners, and it allows a closer look at how partners interact with each other. Figures 5 and 6 show the DDN as it looked in 2014 and then in 2017.

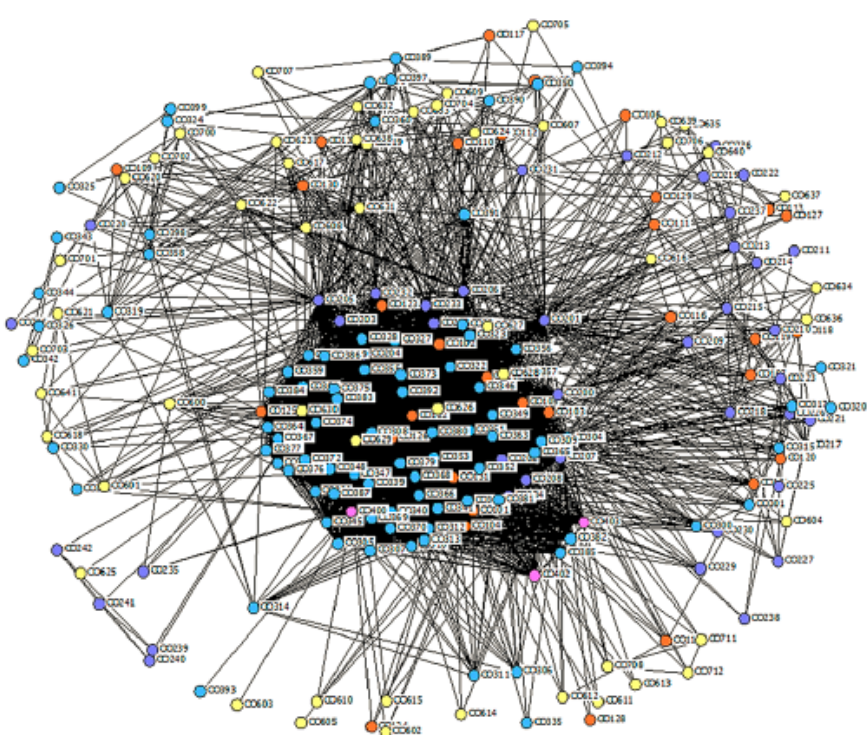
In the first year (2014), the DDN had 63 members (8% students, 40% faculty, 35% community members, and 17% other organizations) collaborating on 50 activities. By 2017, the DDN had reached a size of 218 members (15% students, 19% faculty, 41% community members, 1% management staff, and 24% other organizations) with over 300 activities. As one can see, the DDN had become a large and diverse network over time.

Figure 5 The DDN in 2014



While the network was relatively sparse in 2014, the number of collaborations increased significantly by 2017, and members were also better connected. Hence, the DDN has improved collaboration and connectivity among its members over time. In the network of 2014, we found that academics (purple nodes) played a crucial role. By 2017, however, other community partners (blue) became more central (in the big blurb of black lines), with some academics (purple) still taking a central position. Thus, even in 2017, we can still identify some core partners, while others remain more at the periphery. This means that, although the DDN became more stable over the years, it still had some potential vulnerabilities due to the critical role played by certain core (academic) members, constituting a potential weakness to the project's future success. If these key partners had left the network, they might have left a void that would not have

Figure 6 The DDN in 2017



been easily filled by other members. In particular, some of these critical partners could bridge the gap between members located in the three deltas. Their departure from the network could have affected how these distinct groups would have collaborated in the future.

What did we learn from this? This case illustrates the importance of studying the way different partners are involved in the DDN. The DDN intended to create a space where members could collaborate in a more equitable way, where knowledge was commonly produced and shared across its members, and where members actively engaged in defining solutions for minimizing the impact of human-led activities on the environment. However, a natural outcome of collaboration is that some actors become more central than others. This could be due to competence or simply because individuals that are already central can accumulate more connections more quickly, a phenomenon known as the Matthew effect.

Our social network analysis helped us uncover how different partners interacted in the network and how the ultimate goal of co-developing sustainable management solutions was achieved. Although there are more formal mathematical ways to identify central nodes and check, for example, the “core-peripheriness” of a network, the simple visualization presented here already shows that some key partners are located in the core of the network and that some partners are more peripheral. We could also identify whether some of the key partners in the network had another partner in an “equivalent” position who could have filled the void if that key partner had left the network.

Case 2: Lobbying Networks in the EU Energy and Climate Policy

Our second case considers how interest groups contribute to policy formulation in the EU,

focusing specifically on energy and climate issues. Besides pursuing formal procedures and institutional representation, EU institutions collect input to produce evidence- and consensus-based decisions, which interest groups try to influence. Through public consultations and meetings, actors situated at different levels of governments and representing varied socio-economic interests exchange with each other. The EU is not supposed to provide favors to specific stakeholders (e.g., by granting them a monopoly on representation to policy-makers). Instead, interest groups have broad access but limited influence due to competition. This is known as multi-level and pluralist governance.

» *Are specific actors more influential than others and, if so, which ones? Can we identify different strategies of influence?* «

Provided that good cross-level interactions and balanced representation exist, decision-making can be seen as having a broad democratic legitimacy and as an effective way to solve complex problems. But possible exclusionary mechanisms and the lack of accountability are also regularly pointed out (Börzel & Héard-Lauréote, 2009). Citizens may, therefore, believe that policy-makers enter preferential relationships based on the reciprocal exchange of favors for political support to avoid time-consuming bargaining (clientelism).

Research objective and data. To counter those criticisms and foster trust, EU institutions have increased transparency requirements. One such scheme has been the publication of data regarding meetings between interest groups and the Commission since 2014. Here, we show how such data and SNA can be applied to study the influence of actors in policy-making. We

focus on energy and climate policy because it has become more salient in the public debate and is more lobbied as power struggles intensify. We aim to answer the following questions: *Are specific actors more influential than others and, if so, which ones? Can we identify different strategies of influence?*

The dataset includes 2,816 meetings held between 828 interest organizations and six distinct entities within the Commission between 2014 and 2019. 5% of the meetings were held between the Commission and several interest groups simultaneously. Influence is represented by the actors' size in the following figures.

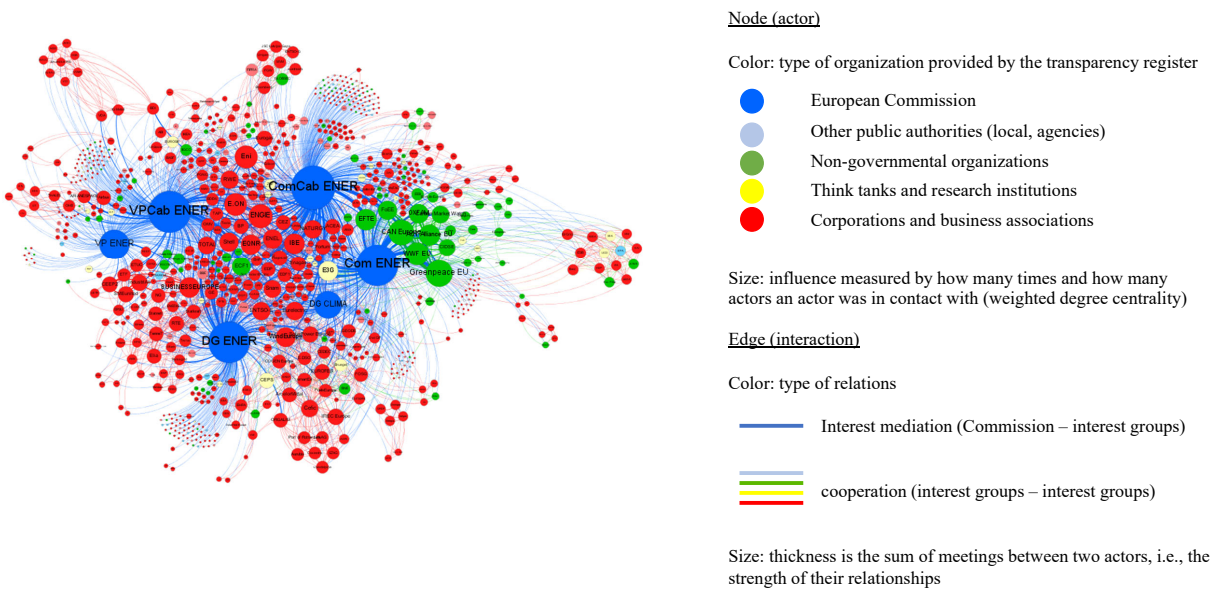
Who are the important actors? The two first observations in Figure 7 corroborate our expectations regarding this type of governance. First, the decision-making process is centralized around governmental actors since the Commission (dark blue) is the most important actor. This is not surprising given that we only have information on meetings with the Commission. Even with broader data collection, the Commission is likely to maintain its position compared to other EU institutions or non-governmental actors (Coen & Richardson, 2009, Börzel & Héard-Lauréote, 2009). Second, we can observe that interest groups have

different levels of influence but that several also share the same level of influence. This means, first, that the influence of stakeholders is limited by the presence of competitors, as would be expected in a pluralist model. And second, that there are significant differences between stakeholders. Hence, the important question is whether some interest groups are more influential than others.

Are business interests more influential? Business dominance is a central topic of interest in group research and fuels criticism against lobbying. Figure 7 shows that about 80% of the represented interest groups are business organizations (red). They benefit from biased access compared to not-for-profit and public interests, represented by NGOs (green), think tanks and research institutions (yellow), and public authorities (light blue).

Yet, two remarks should be made about the overrepresentation of business interests in EU policy-making. First, we distinguish between representation (or access) and influence. In a network approach, influence depends on relationships. Instead of comparing the share of represented categories, we might consider how central an actor is with respect to how many other actors they met and how many times they met. When we consider influence

Figure 7 Network of interest groups (co-)attending meetings with actors of energy and climate policy within the European Commission (2014-2019)



over access, we see that most NGOs (green) and some think tanks (yellow) are as important, if not more important, than the most powerful business actors (red). This shows that not-for-profit actors might be more influential than expected by their share in the network.

Second, using a single category to capture business organizations (Figure 7) hides a broader fragmentation and heterogeneity within this category. In comparison, other categories are rather homogeneous and cohesive. When we subdivide the business category into

different types of business players (Figure 8), we can see that the actors from the energy sector, directly impacted by policy reforms, are bigger than actors from other sectors. This disaggregating logic could be even carried further considering the variety of views and opposing interests on the energy transition within the energy sector.

Which influence strategy do interest groups use? Influence depends on the combination of direct relations with the Commission (interest mediation, Figure 9) and the results of collec-

Figure 8 Network of interest groups (co-)attending meetings with actors of energy and climate policy within the European Commission (2014-2019), different business categories

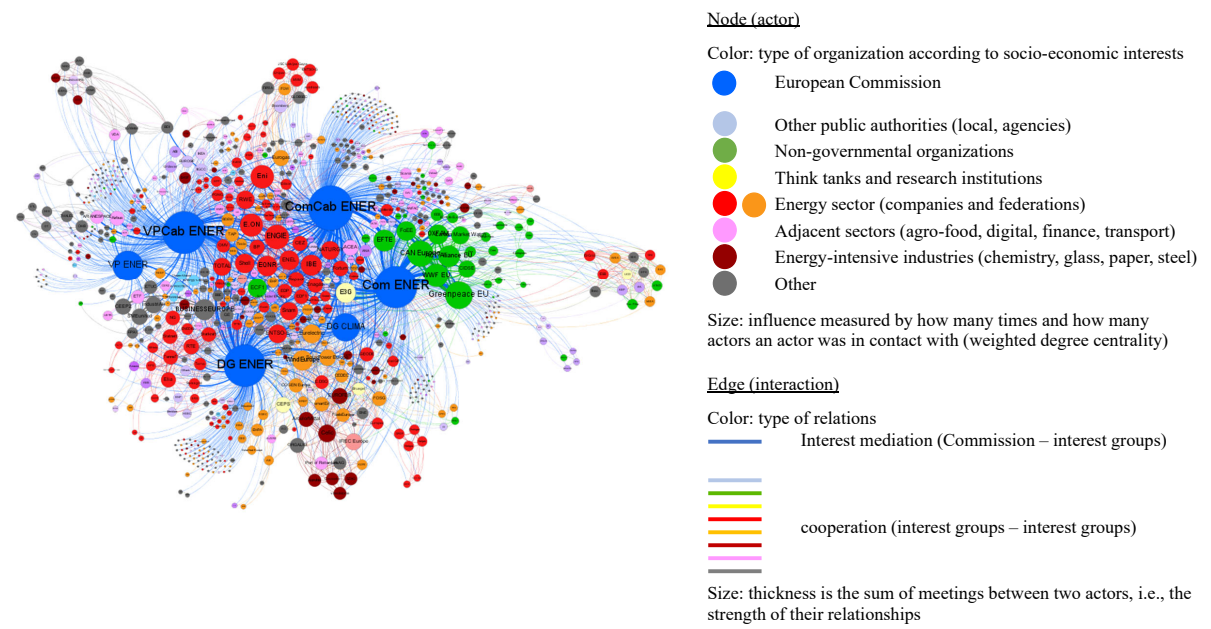
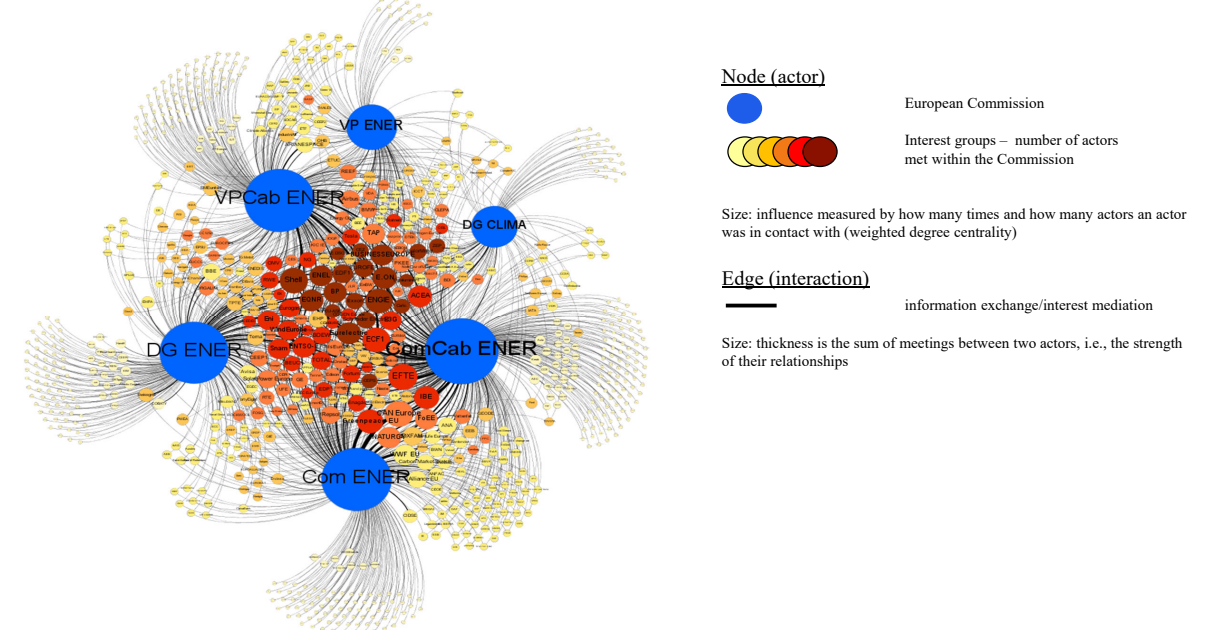


Figure 9 Interest mediation network between interest groups and the European Commission (2014-2019)



tive action among interest groups (cooperation, Figure 10). In Figure 9, our results suggest great disparities between interest groups. 60% of them have met only once with the Commission and 50% only with a single entity in five years. In contrast, 3% have met all six entities, and 4% have met the Commission over 20 times. Even among the most influential actors, we can observe differences. Many business actors commonly identified as opposing ambitious targets and the promotion of renewables (energy utilities, energy intensive industries, confederation of European business; see Fitch-Roy & Fairbrass, 2018) meet with every Commission entity, whereas environmental NGOs forge stronger connections with a few. Further research is needed to determine which of both strategies (connecting to many different entities or focusing on one entity of the Commission) is most successful.

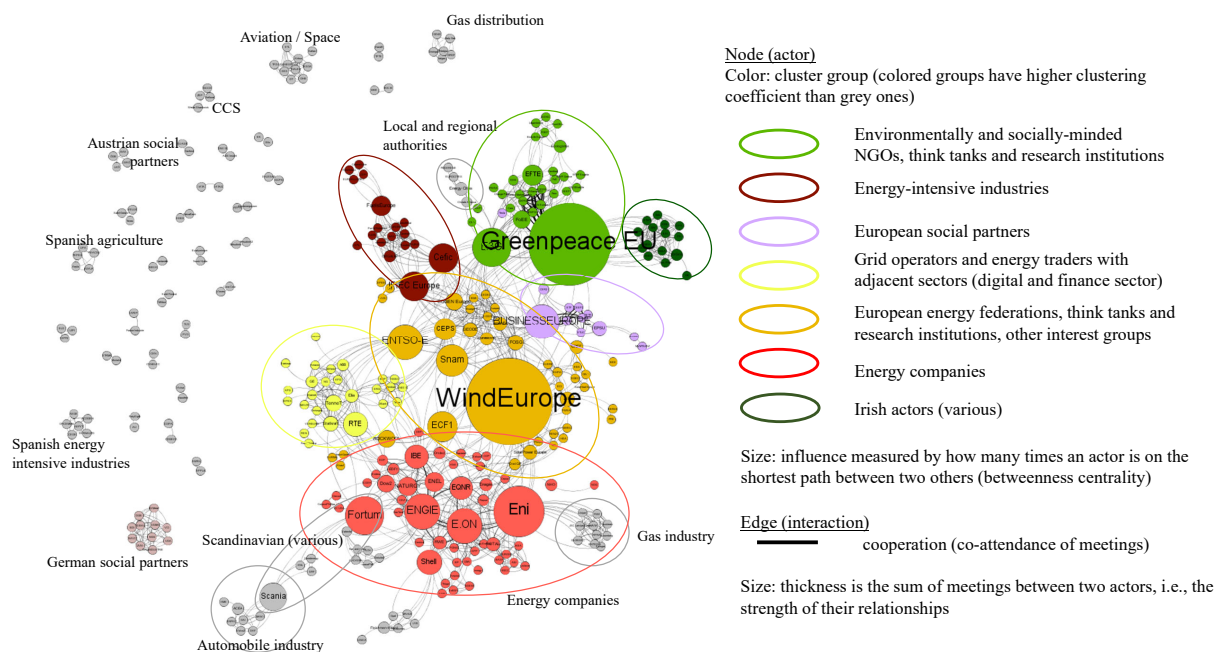
In Figure 10, we analyze the implications of collective action by grouping together actors who frequently interacted with each other. We can detect communities representing specific industries (aviation and space, top left), roles within the energy sector (energy utilities in red), and actors representing national interests (Irish in deep green). We can also observe connections between communities. Actors bridg-

ing across communities can drive collective decision-making towards a consensus, which is why they have an influential role represented by their size (e.g., Greenpeace and the European Wind Energy Association). Overall, our results show that joint meetings are often used for demonstrating cohesion between similar actors (sometimes also to bargain between dissimilar actors) and that the absence of ties may reflect competition and conflictual relations. These results are useful for explaining potential policy changes.

» *Joint meetings are often used for demonstrating cohesion between similar actors – the absence of ties may reflect competition and conflictual relations.* «

What did we learn from this? The European Commission consults a broad and varied range of actors on energy and climate issues. On the one hand, the significant disparities between interest groups in meeting the Commission can be interpreted as a form of preferential

Figure 10 Cooperation network between interest groups



relationships and clientelism. On the other hand, relying on a core of varied actors is also a balancing act between effectiveness and openness, which is still in line with pluralist principles. This is why the EU model is sometimes referred to as elite pluralism (Coen & Richardson, 2009).

At first glance, our results support that this bias favors businesses, especially those promoting the status quo (energy utilities and energy-intensive industries). However, we can identify more nuances by comparing different measures and considering the heterogeneity of business interests. This enables us to understand the variety of strategies and the power distribution between actors in a pluralist and multi-level governance system.

Finally, we want to mention an important caveat for this type of research. There is a lack of clarity on how meetings' topics are disclosed, and most administrative staff in charge of drafting proposals in the Commission are excluded from current transparency requirements. This currently hampers the analysis of interest groups' influence on specific legislative texts, which is unfortunate since it is one of the main reasons to disclose this information in the first place. Still, the combination of transparency data and SNA holds great potential for those who believe that lobbying is more than meets the eye. We need tools to improve the comprehension of complex policy-making and enhance the accountability of governments.

Key Messages

In this contribution, we looked at social network analysis (SNA) and how it can be used to analyze collective decision- and policy-making. The *first case* focused on collaborations among three communities in Canada to resolve regional sustainable development challenges. We showed that some activities bring all part-

ners together while others bring only a few, more diverse partners together. Furthermore, networks can change over time: In our example, the network got larger, more diverse, and showed increased connectivity. One last key message from the Canadian case is that some partners are located at the network's core, whereas others form the periphery. While in 2014, academics were at the core, they were superseded by community partners in 2017. The central actors can also pose a weak point of the network as they would often leave a void difficult to replace if they decided to leave the network.

The *second case* focused on the consultation of actors when it comes to the formulation of EU policies on climate and energy issues. We showed that interest groups have mostly different levels of influence. However, if they share the same level with other groups, their influence is limited due to the presence of competitors. Furthermore, we found that the business sector was heterogeneous, with actors from the energy sector being the most influential. Surprisingly, NGOs and think tanks were more influential than expected by their share in the network. Lastly, we identified two strategies pursued by stakeholders: some of them connected to many different entities, while others focused on only one entity. It remains a question for further research which of them is more successful.

In conclusion, SNA enables us to identify actors taking an active part in governance, the extent to which they engage in that process, and how they interact with others. SNA allows us further to evaluate how the composition of a group changes over time and what potential effects this may have on a group's success in achieving its objectives. It is also possible to uncover hidden structural patterns in complex social systems. These new insights may counterbalance our perception that some actors are overrepresented and therefore more influential.

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