

Case studies show how quasi-governmental organizations could strengthen climate adaptation governance

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The politicization of climate issues and the unsynchronized efforts of stakeholders are hindering the effectiveness of climate adaptation governance in the U.S. According to a new study published by Princeton

researchers, the design characteristics of quasi-governmental organizations (QGOs) could provide insights on how to depoliticize climate information sources and foster multi-level stakeholder coordination.

The study is [published](#) in the journal *Climatic Change*.

Quasi-governmental organizations are entities that have a combination of public and private characteristics, utilizing both for-profit and not-for-profit modes of operation. Though these organizations already play a role in overcoming non-climatic governance challenges—e.g., providing apolitical management in municipal utility services, or resolving port development policy conflict between states—there are few studies that look at how the design of quasi-governmental organizations could be used for climatic purposes.

"The literature on quasi-governmental organizations is sparse—we know little about how their design characteristics vary and what this implies for their ability to overcome governance challenges," explains lead author Paul Nix, a Ph.D. student at Princeton's School of Public and International Affairs. "Consequently, there is a significant research gap on QGOs that limits our ability to assess the U.S." projected institutional capacity to address climate adaptation."

To close this gap in the literature, Nix, Adam Goldstein, and Michael Oppenheimer examined six QGO case studies from a variety of fields and with varying organizational structures. Some of the key characteristics they studied for each organization included the structure and operation of their board of directors, board composition (i.e. public vs. private sector members), and the financial resources available to the organization.

"The landscape of institutions in the climate adaptation domain is rich,"

says Nix. "Scholars have given much attention to emergent and experimental partnerships of different public and private sector actors, as well as to those actors individually. What makes QGOs unusual is that they sit in the space between the public and private sectors by simultaneously embodying characteristics of both."

The results suggest that some quasi-governmental organizations are useful for overcoming politicization or for fostering multi-level stakeholder coordination, but none of the organizations examined in this study proved optimal for both at the same time.

For example, the researchers studied the San Francisco Bay Conservation and Development Commission (SFBCDC) and found that its diverse board of public and private actors would be the ideal circumstance for bringing stakeholders together, but it was likely politicized from past conflicts with local and state politicians. The Regents of the University of California (UC) provides a case with the opposite dynamic. The large size of their board and wide range of [financial resources](#) make their [decision-making process](#) less amenable to the political influence of a single person or organization. However, the UC Regents is not composed of as wide of a variety of decisionmakers and stakeholders as the SFBCDC.

"Our data suggests the socio-political context quasi-governmental organizations emerge from bears a mark on how legislators design these organizations," says Nix. "However, we don't yet fully understand legislators' decision-making process with respect to this design, and therefore it's hard to determine why some of our cases are either better at depoliticizing policy or fostering stakeholder coordination. More research is needed."

Though more data is needed to fully understand how climate policy decisions would be impacted under quasi-governmental designs, co-

author Oppenheimer makes it clear that simply improving upon existing institutions is not likely to solve nuanced and complex climate issues.

"The climate problem and its solutions are so pervasive and complex that we need not merely improved responsiveness from existing institutions," says Oppenheimer, director of the Center for Policy Research on Energy and the Environment and Albert G. Milbank Professor of Geosciences and International Affairs and the High Meadows Environmental Institute. "Society must innovate by building new institutions like quasi-governmental organizations that can respond more quickly and effectively as new threats from [climate change](#) continually emerge over coming decades."

More information: Paul Nix et al, Models of sub-national U.S. quasi-governmental organizations: implications for climate adaptation governance, *Climatic Change* (2024). [DOI: 10.1007/s10584-024-03728-z](https://doi.org/10.1007/s10584-024-03728-z)

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