

# Book Review

Jordan, Andrew, Dave Huitema, Harro van Asselt, and Johanna Foster, editors. 2018. *Governing Climate Change: Polycentricity in Action?* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

*Reviewed by Fee Stehle*  
*University of Potsdam*

Since the members of the parties to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) adopted the Kyoto Protocol in 1997, the landscape of global climate governance has undergone fundamental changes. Climate change is no longer mainly governed multilaterally in a top-down manner by nation-states but has taken on a much more fluid nature, including experiments initiated by subnational, nonstate, or private actors that emerge at subnational levels and may be scaled up to the top. While some scholars have argued that this decentralization or fragmentation impedes the effectiveness of the global climate regime, others have been more optimistic about the functioning of the newly emerging, multifaceted structure.

Among them was Elinor Ostrom, who, in 2009, received the Nobel Prize for her work on the governance of the commons. Ostrom opposed the pessimistic outlook on the future of global climate governance, putting forward the assumption that the existence of a broad range of climate actions from a diverse set of actors at multiple levels—a phenomenon she labeled *polycentric governance*—could, in fact, be a more effective approach to governing climate change than merely relying on the deeds of nation-states. In various contributions she provided a visionary account of the changing global climate regime and evidenced the importance of already existing nonstate climate action, a development she proposed should be studied from a polycentric perspective (Ostrom 2012).

As she passed away shortly after, many of her ideas remained initial assumptions, yet to be empirically tested and theoretically advanced. This turns the theory into an unharvested field, which might be partly responsible for the fascination entwined around it. No contribution has been able to continue the research agenda she envisioned in a systematic way—potentially because climate governance has grown in both scale and size to a dimension that exceeds the analytical capacity of conventional research teams or book projects.

*Governing Climate Change: Polycentricity in Action* sets out to explore the advantages of conceptualizing climate governance as an emerging polycentric system. Guided by an analytical framework, leading experts explore empirical and theoretical aspects of global climate governance in regard to actors and domains of

governance, governance processes, and substantive governance challenges. Five core propositions of polycentric theory, which the editors establish in their introductory chapter, structure the chapters.

The edited volume takes up many of the loose threads Ostrom left behind, providing a much-needed comprehensive and critical continuation of the research agenda she originally envisioned. The expertise of the contributing authors allows them to gain profound insights into different aspects of polycentric climate governance. Among the outstanding contributions to the volume is the chapter by Karin Bäckstrand, Faribor Zelli, and Phillip Schleifer, which sheds light on the understudied nexus between polycentric governance and questions of legitimacy and accountability. Analyzing the specific legitimacy and accountability challenges inherent to polycentric systems of governance using the examples of corporate climate action and climate minilateralism, the authors provide an outline for a larger research agenda. They make the case for how a more systematic reflection of such challenges would improve our understanding of barriers to the achievement of effectiveness in polycentric climate governance and provide valid recommendations for weaving findings into the existing architecture of global climate governance in order to improve existing structures.

Some chapters, particularly those concerned with the substantive governance challenges in section IV, dive deeply into inquiring about the greater implications of a more or less polycentric governance system, and other parts of the book analyze the degree and origin of polycentricity in the respective domains. While this stocktaking is an intended and necessary exercise, it reaches a certain redundancy at some point. We witness a higher grade of polycentricity in different domains of climate governance, but so what? A few chapters, most notably the multiply authored chapter “Transnational Governance,” tackle this challenge by considering the potentially new or different (power) dynamics that might evolve under a governance architecture in flux between interlinked actors and domains of polycentric governance. Other chapters would have benefited from a more rigid analytical frame to guide individual contributions beyond this descriptive level.

Likewise, the conclusion would have profited from a more in-depth and integrated discussion of the findings from the individual chapters. For instance, it would have been interesting to learn what implications the lack of equity has for the legitimacy of polycentric governance and how this affects the effectiveness of climate policies. In short, a more detailed exploration of the interlinkages between the different constituents of polycentric governance would have done justice to both the theory and the excellent contributions in this volume.

That said, the editors have made an immense contribution by bringing together the divergent and complex strands of what can be called a polycentric governance system. The volume has established an excellent foundation on which future studies of polycentric governance can build, and the cracks and gaps that appear should prove to be useful harvesting ground for authors who wish to work this vast field of study.

## Reference

- Ostrom, Elinor. 2012. Nested Externalities and Polycentric Institutions: Must We Wait for Global Solutions to Climate Change before Taking Actions at Other Scales? *Economic Theory* 49: 353–369. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1007/s00199-010-0558-6>