


Planning as polycentric: Institutionalist lessons for communicative and collaborative planning in Global South contexts

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Abstract

This article puts the ‘communicative turn’ in planning into conversation with polycentric governance to offer three lessons for communicative and collaborative planning. These lessons probe the nexus of institutional-cultural contexts and (1) stakeholders’ agency to initiate, enter, and exit discursive arenas, (2) incentives and interactions among actors, and (3) information and power (a)symmetries within communicative-action-based planning processes. The empirical moments for these lessons are evinced using an ecological restoration planning project in a Global South context. The conceptual and empirical dialogues foreground Southern critiques of the limits of normative planning concepts, especially when they are decoupled from historically contingent asymmetric power structures and socio-economic differences within planning cultures.

Introduction

Can communicative and collaborative processes address asymmetric power structures and socio-economic differences in planning the urban commons? The arguments that interactive, discursive, and consensus-building planning can help address deep value differences and asymmetric power relations in place-conscious governance discourses lead some to answer affirmatively, having determined these processes produce

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transformative social learning and institutional capital (Forester, 1999b; Forester, 1999a; Healey, 1997; Healey, 1999; Innes and Booher, 1999). Others are less convinced. For instance, Vanessa Watson found collaborative and communicative planning (CCP) useful for highlighting the role of civil society groups in planning processes, the distributive effects of planning decisions, and the challenges of modernist sensibilities in planning initiatives in sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) contexts (Watson, 2002), but questioned the assumptions held by CCP and other Western liberal normative planning theories. Among her concerns were their blind faith in civil society groups, underestimating the tensions between identity and distributive politics, and fetishization of bottom-up processes (Watson, 2002, 2003, 2009). There are also arguments that CCP prioritizes individuals' processes and agency while neglecting broader contextual processes and forces that thwart and/or promote deliberative processes, power relations, and behavior of individuals (Alexander, 1996; Huxley, 2000; Huxley and Yiftachel, 2000; Tewdwr-Jones and Allmendinger, 1998; Silverman et al., 2020).

This article offers new insights for answering this contentious question by re-considering the "communicative turn" in planning through the systems-based, institutional lens of the polycentric governance framework (Aligica and Tarko, 2012; Ostrom et al., 1961; McGinnis and Ostrom, 2012). The communicative turn in planning describes discursive and consensus-building models of planning. The 'turn' regards planning's thoroughgoing exploration and incorporation of such models as expressed in communicative planning (Forester, 1989; Forester, 1999b), and collaborative planning (Healey, 1997; Healey, 2003). Communicative and collaborative planning models draw from Jürgen Habermas' Theory of Communicative Action (Habermas, 1984, 1987), specifically his ideas of democracy being transformative rather than simply a preferential aggregation mechanism, and "ideal speech" being the yardstick with which to examine multi-stakeholder communicative process within the public sphere. Collaborative planning also draws from Giddens' structuration theory (1984). Following Huxley and Yiftachel's argument that "theorizing planning practice means applying meta-level theories from outside planning" (Huxley and Yiftachel, 2000: 338), I draw core ideas from the polycentric framework (Aligica and Tarko, 2012; Ostrom, 2008, 2009; Ostrom et al., 1961) to offer lessons why CCP's normative goals may fail to materialize when their principles and methods are deployed (in theory and practice) outside the broader institutional-cultural context within which planning operates.

Some theoretical and contextual qualifications are required before proceeding. Although Healey's 1997 seminal piece briefly mentioned Elinor Ostrom's 1990 classic work (see pages 269 and 285 in Healey, 1997), the rich interdisciplinary conversation among Elinor and Vincent Ostrom and their colleagues remained missing in the institutionalist project of CCP. This interdisciplinary tradition, sometimes known as the Bloomington School of Political Economy (BSPE), carefully unpacks how institutional configurations in diverse social-ecological and political contexts structure processes, behaviors, and outcomes (Aligica, 2014; Ostrom and Ostrom, 1965; McGinnis, 1999; McGinnis, 2015; McGinnis and Ostrom, 2012). In responding to critiques of CCP, Patsy Healey admits, "But as I have developed my own understanding and awareness of the breadth of what is

often called these days the ‘new institutionalism’, I have to acknowledge that my treatment of the approach in 1997 was partial” (2003: 114).

As with many interdisciplinary projects, the work of the BSPE is often read in silos, sometimes viewed as the theory of the commons, or theory of polycentricity, among others. As scholars, we often introduce smaller parts of our research agenda in different articles or books, risking the possibility of our work being misread, or others missing the larger intellectual contribution (similar sentiments were expressed by [Healey, 2003](#) in responding to her critiques). Usefully, Elinor Ostrom provided a holistic reading of the BSPE’s work in two very important writings: her 1997 presidential address at the American Political Science Association ([Ostrom, 1998](#)), and her revised lecture on “Beyond state and market,” delivered in Stockholm, Sweden, when she received her Nobel Prize ([Ostrom, 2009](#)). In these, she connected the dots of her extensive empirical work on the commons to key intellectual debates around the governance (production, provision, and management) of goods by diverse institutional arrangements theorized by scholars such as Woodrow Wilson, Vincent Ostrom, and James Buchanan. By way of example, Elinor Ostrom has noted that her work on the commons addresses what was in part a response to the 1961 concern raised by Vincent Ostrom and colleagues ([Ostrom et al., 1961](#)) regarding the need to think beyond state-market dichotomy in reframing the governance/planning of goods and services as a polycentric question; she writes:

“Extensive empirical research leads me to argue that instead, a core goal of public policy should be to facilitate the development of institutions that bring out the best in humans. We need to ask how diverse polycentric institutions help or hinder the innovativeness, learning, adapting, trustworthiness, levels of cooperation of participants, and the achievement of more effective, equitable, and sustainable outcomes at multiple scales...”

Interrogating CCP through a polycentric lens thus permits analyzing how its goals align, conflict, subvert and/or transform the broader institutional system within which planning operates. More specifically, I re-read [Watson’s \(2002\)](#) critiques of normative planning theories as lacking a context-defined systems view of planning, especially when deployed in global South contexts, by putting the communicative turn in planning into conversation with the BSPE to add to what [Healey \(1997: 288\)](#) characterized as the “institutional, communicative approach.”

Second, it is also important to qualify my use of the term “planning.” I am aware that some conceive planning more broadly as thinking while or before acting or the everyday decisions of individuals, community groups, firms, and non-governmental groups ([Bratman, 1987](#); [Hoch, 2007](#); [Hopkins and Knaap, 2018](#); [Kaza and Knaap, 2011](#)). Similar to Vanessa Watson, I use the term rather narrowly in this article to refer to the “intentional public actions which impact on the built and natural environment, and which are frequently accompanied by political processes of some kind” ([Watson, 2002: 28](#)). Some refer to these intentional public decisions as “public sector planning” ([Klosterman, 1985: 13](#)) or “public planning” ([Brooks, 2002: 35](#)), often pursued by a collective of individuals (e.g., planners and allied professionals) engaged in ‘planning’ for a jurisdiction in consultation

with elected officials and residents of a jurisdiction (Brooks, 1988). I use the term planning throughout this article to refer to these decisions.

In the remainder of the article, I next highlight the critique that CCP privileges the agency of individuals at the expense of the broader institutional and cultural context within which communicative and collaborative processes occur. I then deploy the polycentric lens of the BSPE to reveal three lessons regarding the limits of CCP, especially when considered within global South contexts. These lessons probe the nexus of institutional-cultural context and (1) actors' agency to initiate, enter, and exit collaborative planning, (2) incentives and interactions among actors, and (3) information and power (a) symmetries. The discussions here draw from key arguments and insights from Southern scholars regarding co-production, property rights, and urban development in global South contexts. Then, the case of a long-term ecological restoration planning process in Accra, Ghana is reviewed to identify how the three previously-discussed lessons characterized this process. This case study helps illuminate Southern critiques of normative planning concepts, particularly illustrating how the broader institutional-cultural context of a planning culture shapes grassroots dialogic and collaborative process. I conclude by offering insights for "situating" planning (Campbell, 2006) within the socio-spatial realities of places, especially within global South contexts.

The communicative turn in planning and its discontents

Numerous studies have provided the philosophical foundations, tenets and debates around the communicative turn in planning, and the goal here is not to repeat these thorough arguments (cf. Fischler, 2000; Healey, 2003; Huxley, 2000; Tewdwr-Jones and Allmendinger, 1998). Rather, the exercise here is to use Healey's (1997) suggested four "institutional audit" guide to draw attention to a core criticism of the communicative turn's tendency to "gloss over contextual understandings of power and material interests, of discourse and the constraints of the taken-for-grantedness of the world" (Huxley and Yiftachel, 2000: 337). Then, I draw insights from the polycentric work of the BSPE to distill three lessons that help to illuminate this core critique, especially within global South contexts.

The first of Healey's (1997) four institutional audit guides requires that initiators of the process provide formal and informal discussion arenas/venues to discuss issues of concern and recruit other stakeholders to engage in strategic discussions. The initiators must have the capacity: to discern 'windows of opportunity' for change, including cracks/conflicts within hegemonic power structures, and for turning such opportunities into catalysts for change. Second, these discursive arenas must have rules for open, inclusionary argumentation with attention paid to communication styles or discursive 'rituals' (Forester, 1982), ensuring that the language employed is clear and sincere (Forester, 1993; Innes, 1998), and promoting representation of voices in discourses, including those not present at the table. Third, the collaborative process must make policy discourses an "open out" discussion; it must also be interactive, allowing new ideas and ways of thinking to emerge in argumentation, developing alternative storylines about possible actions to address an issue, and ensuring that such storylines are attentive to what can and

cannot be done, and who benefits and suffers. Fourth and finally, formalized rules and resources are needed to maintain agreements and consensus among stakeholders, as are avenues (e.g., courts) for conflict resolution and (re)interpretation of consensus to minimize interpretative distortion.

Employing these institutional audit guides is not done easily. Analytical and practical challenges in the application of, and the intellectual foundation under, the communicative turn in planning frequently present themselves (cf. [Allmendinger and Tewdwr-Jones, 2002](#); [Huxley and Yiftachel, 2000](#); [Watson, 2014](#)). Of interest in this article is the challenge, or failure, of the communicative turn to account for the broader institutional context in its analysis. This context refers to human-constructed opportunities and constraints in the form of rules, norms, and strategies that are considered legitimate within a cultural setting and are drawn upon by institutional actors to inform decisions and choices ([Crawford & Ostrom, 1995](#); [McGinnis, 2011](#)). Within these contexts it remains unclear why certain individuals lack incentives to initiate institutional design around collaboration or opportunities to freely enter or exit discursive arenas based on constitutional or legal provisions mandating who enters or exits such arenas. This critique broadly relates to the structure-agency or structuration criticism of the communicative turn, “Structure seems to be aspects of the broad context in which agents operate. Agents seem to be key people working in institutions, in which case institutions become wrongly personified as people” ([Ball, 1998](#): 1512).

Responding to critiques and recognizing the need for an explicit institutional analysis attentive to power and structure-agency relations, ([Healey, 2003](#)) emphasized the influence of structuration theory ([Giddens, 1984](#)) on what she considered a relational perspective of how institutional (rule) designs shape power relations in ways that condition how people internalize assumptions about the appropriateness of certain discourses and practices (which later may become codified into their institutionalized context). Admitting her partial treatment of institutionalism in her earlier work and neglect of (new)institutionalist analysis, she calls for critical frameworks attentive to such relational institutional dynamics and contexts of planning ([Healey, 2003](#)). In what follows, I heed Healey’s call for critical frameworks by drawing from the polycentric work of the BSPE to illuminate the structure-agency dynamics within collaborative and communicative planning.

Institutional limits of communicative and collaborative planning: Lessons from the polycentric framework

Polycentricity connotes the constellation of semi-autonomous decision-making centers/actors that operate within an overarching system of rules ([Aligica and Tarko, 2012](#); [McGinnis and Ostrom, 2012](#); [Ostrom et al., 1961](#)). As a concept, polycentricity is employed both normatively and analytically (see [Thiel, 2016](#)), but its analytical usefulness is of primary interest in this article. It offers a lens to examine the conditions under which an institutional context may support or constrain collective action efforts ([Frimpong Boamah, 2018b](#); [Pahl-Wostl and Knieper, 2014](#); [Thiel, 2016](#)) from which three

lessons are gleaned. These lessons both help describe this lens and connects the institutional-cultural context to individuals' agency within a CCP process.

Lesson 1. Institutional-cultural context structures actors' agency to initiate, enter, and exit CCP

Similar to the institutional communicative approach, the polycentric lens emphasizes the interaction of diverse actors and views to generate and advance mutually shared goals (Aligica and Tarko, 2012; Ostrom, 2008, 2009). However, this lens also seeks to connect the agency of these actors to the broader institutional context by examining whether such context allows or constrains (1) the activation and free entry and exit of multiple actors within decision arenas, (2) the capacity of actors to generate and build consensus around preferred common/shared goals. Examining actors' entry and exit conditions within arenas for discussions and decisions is about *spontaneity*, which Ostrom (1972), drawing from Polanyi (1951), explains is crucial for a system (e.g., decision arena) to self-organize. That is, the ability for individuals to freely activate, enter, and exit discussion arenas allows for the possibility of new ideas to emerge as individuals exit existing decision arenas to initiate or freely enter new ones. The polycentric lens does not assume but examines how an institutional context allows for such liberty and spontaneity to initiate, enter, or exit discursive and collaborative arenas.

The institutional communicative approach assumes that there will be "initiators" or "activators" who will build a "stakeholder community" by inviting other people to participate (enter) in the decision arenas over time (Healey, 1997: 271). Individuals' capacity to initiate, enter, and exit discursive arenas for collaboration are not entirely dependent on actors exercising their moral agency or "inclusionary ethics" (p. 271). Some have pushed back on calls for planners to facilitate between experts and stakeholders (Healey 1997) or serve as 'critical friends' (Forester. 1996) because these calls embody moral imperatives without clarifying why planners act (or may not act) this way within CCP processes (Allmendinger and Tewdwr-Jones, 2002).

Within certain planning cultures, the arena for discussing and acting upon certain issues, who initiates or activates such arenas, and who enters and exits such arenas are partly determined by formal institutional regimes, including state constitutional or other regulatory provisions. For instance, land use discussions often occur within formal zoning and other regulatory environments, usually within rigid rules specifying the arenas for making such decisions (e.g., boards and commissions), communication and decision procedures (e.g., Robert's Rules), and who can enter or exit such arenas and how (e.g., elections and appointments). Some scholars note while it is relatively easy for volitional groups (e.g., environmental interest group) to form and dissolve because members can easily *exit* [leave the group] or *voice* their dissent within the group (Hirschman, 1970), non-volitional groups often restrict members from exiting or even voicing their dissent (Kaza, 2014). Could individuals, exercising their moral agency, activate, invite others, and enter and exit freely the oftentimes rigid institutional context around land use? What would an institutional communicative approach to decisions around real property look like when one considers the broader institutional context within which such decisions are

made? The answers to these questions may vary by context. For instance, studies around NIMBYism (not-in-my-backyard) in global North contexts contend that the spontaneous and free entry and exit of nimbyists in state-sanctioned environmental planning processes may help address the underlying collective action in environmental planning (Rydin and Pennington, 2000).

In global South contexts, such as those in sub-Saharan Africa, individuals (mostly residents of informal communities) informally activate, invite others, enter, or exit *invented* discussion arenas to collaborate around land use issues (e.g., Appadurai, 2001; Krishna et al., 2020). Case studies of such informal efforts illustrate that their success or failure is not simply a function of the agentic moral actions of the involved actors, but – and more importantly – it is the linking of such efforts to the broader formal institutional context, or what Watson (2014) discusses as co-production (not simply CCP). Some of these case studies illustrate that, unlike Forester's (1993) communicative 'rituals,' grassroots rituals of the Slum Dwellers International (SDI) or the Asian Coalition for Housing Rights (ACHR) connect informal collaborative efforts of community-based organizations of the urban poor to their broader formal institutional contexts and processes, including government efforts and regulations (Archer et al., 2012; Mitlin, 2008; Farouk and Owusu, 2012).

Lesson 2. Institutional-cultural regimes structure actors' interactions and incentives within CCP

Communicative and collaborative planning emphasizes *rules inside* the decision arena to minimize communicative distortions, including dialogic rules for truthful, comprehensible, and sincere open-style inclusionary argumentation and rules to maintain consensus (Forester, 1987; Forester, 1982; Healey, 1997; Healey, 2003). The polycentric lens adds another layer of inquiry by probing how the overarching rules of the (planning)game outside discursive arenas structure (1) incentives facing stakeholders, and (2) interactions among stakeholders within and outside discursive arenas. The polycentric lens foregrounds that the institutional-cultural regimes shape the overarching system of rules within which actors operate, both within and outside a decision arena (Ostrom, 1990; Ostrom, 2005; Ostrom, 1999). These rules define actors' institutional positions/roles within and outside a decision arena, as well as the incentives derived from and rights and responsibilities assigned to such roles, leading to different configurations of ordered relationships among actors: vertical or top-down hierarchical (command-and-control), or horizontal (Aligica and Tarko, 2012; Ostrom, 2005).

Actors involved in discussion arenas for CCP learn from and embody their institutional contexts' histories, values, and logics. For example, some argue that individuals enter into discussion arenas with social-cognitive attitudes formed through their institutional-cultural contexts, including being opposed to deliberations, having strong opinions on all topics, and winning (not building consensus through) arguments (Gambetta, 1998; Allmendinger and Tewdwr-Jones, 2002). Some CCP proponents (e.g., Innes, 1992) suggest trading ineffective and often adversarial top-down institutional regimes for a table of stakeholders who convene around win-win solutions (Fischler, 2000). In most global

South contexts, colonially-inherited laws and practices around planning and urban development result in top-down, hierarchical, or command-and-control institutional regimes (Frimpong Boamah and Amoako, 2020; Moser, 2015; Njoh, 2009; Yiftachel, 2009). In such contexts, CCP à la Healey and Forester must confront the challenges of designing horizontal, dialogic discussion arenas that are often seen to oppose the state's vertical planning logic, which is more about presenting state-sanctioned planning and urban development initiatives to communities (see Mitlin, 2008; Watson, 2014). For scholars working in global South contexts, the goal is to find creative ways to work or co-produce with(in) these top-down regimes, or risk throwing the baby (top-down planning regimes) out with the bathwater (see Appadurai, 2001; Watson, 2014).

Significant threats to designing and implementing horizontal dialogic arenas come from state and non-state actors when these actors embody *deep differences* in incentives and ethno-social, political, and economic identities, values and behaviors (Watson, 2002; Watson, 2006). For example, an analysis of participatory planning processes about migration in South Africa concluded that “participatory planning has created incentives for excluding the interests of migrants...” partly due to the centralized or hierarchical nature of institutional planning and budgetary decisions: excluding migrants’ needs ‘conserved’ resources and made state officials happy (Landau et al., 2013: 120). The polycentric lens allows for such nuanced analysis of collaborative or participatory planning endeavors, especially within global South contexts, by distilling how institutional-cultural structures drive agency within, and form the dynamics of, (faux)CCP processes.

Lesson 3. Information and power (a)symmetries are structural in CCP

Sharing information publicly and addressing power relations are central to CCP and the polycentric framework. Making information available to stakeholders is empowering and ensures accountability (Healey, 1997; Innes, 1998), especially when information is (1) “mapped and interpreted within the sense-making frameworks” of the local context and social networks, and (2) generated through consensus, which engenders mutual trust, shared understanding, and cultural identity (Healey, 1999: 114 and 116). CCP also emphasizes the “power of agency” (Healey, 2003: 105), valuing individuals as creative and inventive in navigating powerful structural forces (Healey, 2003; Healey and Underwood, 1979). CCP has also been critiqued, including the limits that deliberations have in addressing the information and power asymmetries that are often driven by the broader institutional-cultural contexts of individuals (Flyvbjerg and Richardson, 2002; Huxley and Yiftachel, 2000; McGuirk, 2001).

The polycentric lens offers some thoughts on the information-power nexus and how to situate this nexus within a structure-agency analysis of CCP processes. Information is a commons: the use of information or ideas by an individual does not diminish the use of them by others, but it is possible to exclude people from having that information or idea by keeping it a secret (Hess and Ostrom, 2003). There are costs involved in generating and managing the information commons, including the cognitive and time costs for boundedly rational individuals to pay attention, obtain, and process information while

taking into account the preferences and values of others during deliberations (Lara, 2015; Ostrom, 1998; Ostrom, 2005). Such information costs are affected by deliberative strategies, impacting the transaction costs for collaboration (Ostrom et al., 1994; Rydin, 2003). Associated with these information costs are asymmetrical manipulative power and opportunism, where some individuals leverage their ability to retain, obtain, or process more information to manipulate discourses and behaviors to serve their interests (Sager, 2006). Often, such information-related advantages also result from *strategy externality*, where individuals transfer information, beliefs, and behaviors from one decision arena to another by participating in multiple decision arenas (Bednar and Page, 2007; Lubell, 2013).

A polycentric lens pushes collaborative and communicative planning by probing, (1) *whether information is publicly or privately available and about the cost to obtain and exchange information*, and (2) *how information costs mediate and are also mediated by the forms of power wielded by actors within a decision arena*. Morrison et al. (2017), illuminate how information and associated costs within a polycentric system shape power relations among actors within discursive or decision arenas, including those wielding *power by design* (authority to make decisions and distribute resources), *pragmatic power* (authority to administer, implement, and enforce decisions and rules), and *framing power* (authority to interpret, construct, and frame ideas, norms, and ideas). Planning systems are imbricated in power relations, and the position of power adopted in this article holds that the state and its actors manage or govern the commons (or are unable to do so) when a variety of reasons provide opportunities for actors to intimate, manipulate, or control others and resources in ways that impact planning decisions, institutions, and outcomes (Albrechts, 2003; Rose, 1999). Similar to others, this position does not view power as always unequal, totalizing, or repressive or negative (Flyvbjerg, 1998; Watson, 2009): rather, the subjects of power (state and its actors, citizens, firms) and the power of subjects are reconstituted (Foucault, 1980; Digeser, 1992), offering opportunities for co-production and emancipation, especially in the global South (Frimpong Boamah et al., 2020; Irazábal, 2009; Watson, 2009, 2014; Yiftachel, 2009). For Watson (2014: 72), the activities of grassroots movements in global South contexts reveal how “their power lies in their information base, [and] their ideas...”; these are often less visible when viewed through a CCP lens.

It is also difficult to see how the information-power nexus and associated costs and asymmetries are context-sensitive and deeply embedded within the broader institutional-cultural context. Some have noted that civil society organizations in global South contexts give voice to marginalized voices by engaging in contradictory, opportunistic, and *not-so-democratic* discourses and practices that allow them to secure material gains (Robins et al., 2008; Watson, 2014). Others find that civil society organizations construct a “civic realm” for dialoguing and fostering identity while also contesting and acquiescing to the disciplinary forces within top-down institutional regimes (Roy, 2009; Yiftachel, 2009). In these global South contexts, the public sphere for rational dialogic processes is also an information-power sphere, circumscribed within political patronage and paternalism that cannot be assumed away (Watson, 2014).

The polycentric lessons in action: Ecological restoration planning in Accra, Ghana

To demonstrate the applicability and usefulness of these lessons, CCP processes associated with the Korle Lagoon Ecological Restoration Project (KLERP) in Accra, Ghana were examined. The KLERP has been a long-term planning project, spanning multiple actors and jurisdictional scales. This case allows for historical and systems-view analysis of a planning process and its dynamics over time. Specifically, the case illustrates how a state-sponsored (hierarchical) ecological restoration planning process started in the early 2000s, changed to something resembling collaborative and communicative planning between 2003-2008, and then broke down after 2009. The polycentricity lessons reveal how these changes and results materialized due to the institutional-cultural context that structured entry and exit, consensus-building, incentives and interactions, and information and power asymmetries among stakeholders.

First, a brief commentary about the data and methods employed in this case study analysis. The case study account is openly neutral, siding neither with residents nor with government officials. I write as an at-length observer, utilizing secondary data sources, including legal and other policy documents on planning and land laws and processes in Ghana, and copious historical documentations of the KLERP in scholarly writing, reports by government and non-government agencies, and newspaper articles. These documents were collected using the multi-query search criteria in the Publish or Perish software, which searches through Google Scholar, Scopus, and Web of Science databases (Harzing, 2010). The GhanaWeb.com website, which aggregates content from newspapers in Ghana on news and opinion about social, political, and economic issues, was also used to collect media reports on the KLERP. These searches included records from as far back as the 1990s. Drawing from suggestions on content analysis (Krippendorff, 2012; LeCompte, 2000), thematic texts were extracted from the contents gathered to map (1) historical accounts of the KLERP, including crucial historical junctures, (2) stakeholders and their roles, and discursive arenas and strategies employed within and around the KLERP, and (3) significant institutional-cultural contexts that shaped the trajectory of the KLERP. It is not the intent of this to add new (or refute existing) evidence. Instead, it offers a novel means for considering the KLERP in light of the three lessons offered by the polycentric framework to better evaluate CCP within global South contexts.

Case context and the three polycentric lessons

The Korle Lagoon, with the Odaw River and two other major rivers flowing into it (Grant, 2006; Karikari et al., 1998), drains a catchment area of about 155 square miles in Accra, Ghana that feeds directly into the Gulf of Guinea on the Atlantic Ocean (see [Figure 1](#)). In its heyday, this wetland functioned as a vibrant and healthy ecosystem inhabited by multiple aquatic species and visited by both international and domestic migratory bird species (Ntiamao-Baidu, 1991). Since the 1920s, colonial and postcolonial governments have pursued state-led, centralized ecological planning initiatives to restore and ‘modernize’ this wetland and its surroundings. During this same period, the lagoon has become

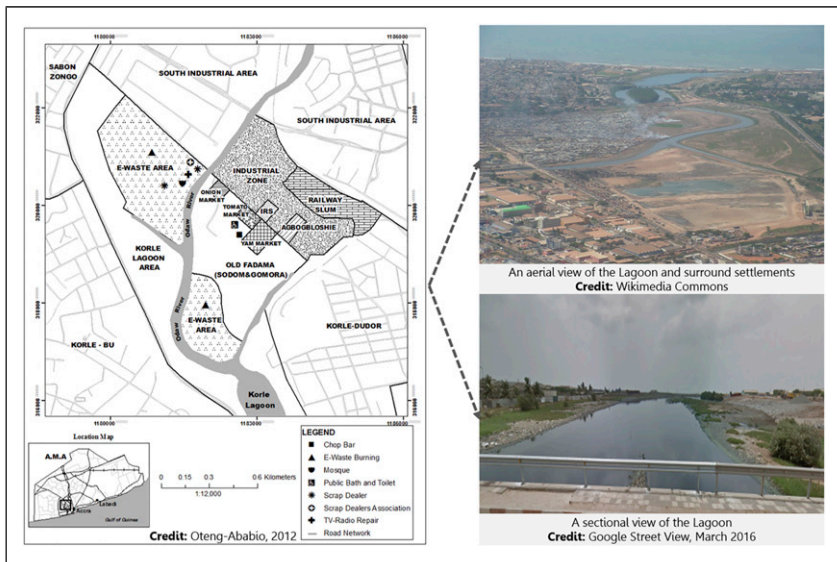


Figure 1. Map of the study context: Korle Lagoon and the twin informal settlements in Accra, Ghana.

increasingly polluted, which has worsened the perennial flooding around its catchment areas.

The tragedy of the Korle Lagoon commons has primarily been attributed to the social processes occurring adjacent to or within the catchment area, including the growth of Old Fadama/Agbogbloshie, Ghana’s largest ‘twin’ informal settlements (see [Amoako and Frimpong Boamah, 2015](#); [Amoako and Frimpong Boamah, 2020](#)). Based on the 2009 enumeration conducted by the Ghana Federation of the Urban Poor (GHAFUP), this twin-informal settlement had a population of 79,684 (the latest estimate to date), and a population density of 2,562 persons per hectare ([Farouk and Owusu, 2012](#)). This twin-settlement, a resettlement site for refugees fleeing ethnic conflict in the Northern part of Ghana, now houses a popular wholesale market for foodstuffs and has become a global dumping site for electronic waste ([Grant and Oteng-Ababio, 2012](#); [Oteng-Ababio, 2012](#); [Stacey and Lund, 2016](#)).

Because of the social-ecological tragedies facing the Korle Lagoon commons, the 1990s ushered significant state-led, top-down planning efforts to restore the lagoon and its surrounding areas. Having secured a loan of approximately \$120 million, the national government and its agencies, together with the local government in Accra, began this project in March 2000, anticipating its completion in December 2003. This project was a technical solution to what some see as a human-centric problem ([Innes, 1995](#)) the likes of which do not have technical solutions ([Hardin, 1968](#)), or that planning does not know how to solve ([Wildavsky, 1973](#)). If one accepts the inappropriateness of applying technical solutions to such problems, it is not surprising the \$120M project has not yet been

completed. Fourteen years after the project's planned 2003 completion date, Ghana's Environmental Protection Agency declared the Lagoon dead due to its volume of pollutants.

Institutional-cultural context and actors' agency to initiate, enter, and exit the KLERP

The planning conducted for the KLERP began as a multi-stakeholder process, but this only involved the national and local government agencies and international agencies. These included the sector Ministries and agencies, and financial support and oversight from international institutions including the OPEC Fund for International Development, the Arab Bank for Economic Development in Africa, the Kuwait Fund for Arab Economic Development, the Belgium Government Supported Export Credit, and the Standard Chartered Bank of London. The in-country oversight responsibilities were with the local government (Accra Metropolitan Assembly or AMA) and Ghana's Environmental Protection Agency (EPA). From its early conception and execution phases, the voices of residents, business owners, and property owners (chiefs and family/clan heads) were absent.

The first polycentric lesson links the institutional-cultural context of the KLERP to why its planning process was activated in a way that limited the free entry and exit of local residents (especially those living in Old Fadama/Agbogbloshie). Two institutional-cultural contexts are significant here. First, Ghana's legal regimes and institutional practices around planning evince a top-down planning process, even though the country's Constitution and planning regulations, such as the 1994 National Development Planning Systems Act (Act 480), 1993 Local Government Act (Act 462), and the 2016 Land Use and Spatial Planning Act, (Act 925), make provisions for a decentralized planning system (see [Frimpong Boamah, 2018a](#)). For example, the National Development Planning Commission (NDPC) provides planning guidelines (sometimes referred to as development frameworks) to local governments to develop medium-term development plans (a five-year plan), which are ultimately collated and approved by the NDPC. Most local planning projects start with the national government (e.g., project ideation, funding, and implementation). Who initiates, joins, and leaves these projects is dictated and/or influenced by the national government. The regulatory requirement to conduct environmental and social impact assessments set the tone for who would be included and excluded in the initial KLERP planning process. For instance, one government-hired consultant for the impact study, "...urged the government to declare Old Fadama a national disaster site and resettle the people" ([Braitham, 2011](#)). Declared a 'disaster site,' the study's report and existing planning frameworks mapped Old Fadama/Agbogbloshie as a risk to be mitigated, thereby legitimizing 'removal' discourses and producing 'consensus' around state actions to demolish buildings, evict residents, and exclude potential dissenting voices from the process. Second, this top-down institutional planning context was further deepened by a national political culture in which projects are initiated and abandoned depending on the political party holding office. From the 2000s till today, successive governments have promised to deal with this 'disaster site' and people, often

abandoning discursive and participatory approaches employed by previous governments. In other words, the capacity to initiate, enter, and join planning processes are often mediated by Ghana's top-down institutional milieu and national political culture.

The KLERP process is what one would expect when CCP is considered divorced from the messy institutional and political culture in most global South contexts. The KLERP constituted national discursive and decision arenas with entry and exit by powerful global funding partners and national and subnational political and bureaucratic actors, following statutory planning laws and practices. In principle and legally, there were discursive arenas for these stakeholders to dialogue, build consensus, and raise funds to implement the KLERP. Politically, the 'right' government officials have been at the table to represent the interests of each successive government since the KLERP project began. From the perspective of national government actors, the KLERP embodied a CCP process activated by national actors who invited other stakeholders to dialogue, build policy discourses, maintain consensus, and raise money to revitalize the Korle Lagoon commons. The absence of residents' voices, who eventually protested against the KLERP, raises questions about limitations of CCP in global South contexts: Can a planning process be collaborative and communicative if its 'public spheres' for rational communication, intersubjective learning, and consensus-building include or exclude voices based on their alignment with its institutional-cultural context? What are the limits and prospects for CCP within a highly centralized institutional-cultural context? The following two polycentric lessons offer some thoughts regarding these questions.

Institutional-cultural regimes, incentives, and interactions within the KLERP

The second polycentric lesson connects the overarching rules (institutional-cultural regimes) for planning to the incentives and interactions within the KLERP. More than 30,000 residents of Old Fadama and Agbogbloshie woke up in May 2002 to eviction letters served by Accra's local government, the Accra Metropolitan Assembly (AMA). The 'need' for eviction was rationalized by an Environmental and Social Impact Statement (ESIS), which essentially recommended the removal of Old Fadama/Agbogbloshie in their entirety to make room for the KLERP, allowing for the restoration of the wetlands with extensive landscaping and recreational opportunities. This recommendation was accepted and incorporated into Accra's Master Plan without input from the soon-to-be affected residents (COHRE, 2004).

The top-down planning regime and national political culture within which the KLERP was designed and implemented was contested en masse for the first time by residents in Old Fadama and Agbogbloshie when they were served with the eviction notices in May 2002. Residents and their advocates considered the planning rules, practices, and directives in the Accra Master Plan and statements made by national government stakeholders for the KLERP to be unfair, non-transparent, and/or false (COHRE, 2004: 7). The KLERP planning process had violated the Habermasian idea of undistorted, sincere, and truthful communication (Forester, 1993; Innes, 1998). What may have informed such violations in ways that illuminate the challenges of CCP in global South contexts?

The second polycentric lesson emphasizes how the overarching institutional-cultural regimes structure stakeholders' incentives and interactions. Both political and financial incentives drove stakeholders' interactions within the KLERP. In the early 2000s, the newly elected national government was headed by the New Patriotic Party (NPP). Its appointed local government officials in Accra (e.g., mayor of Accra) were incentivized to restore and modernize the Korle Lagoon and its environs as part of their 'Modernization of the Capital City' campaign promise. The government also had a financial incentive to complete the KLERP on time to avoid paying penalties on loans secured for the grant. Thus, the KLERP embodied political and financial incentives that reinforced the state's commitment to deepening its hierarchical interactions and decisions with other stakeholders to meet such incentives while also making the KLERP appear collaborative, deliberative, and legitimate. For instance, while it seemed that the Environmental and Social Impact Statement (ESIS) prepared as part of the KLERP project involved a deliberative process, a report prepared by one of the community advocacy groups noted, "...it appears that those preparing the ESIS failed from the outset to take an objective stance, and began their investigation with the assumption that the relocation of Agbobbloshie was a foregone conclusion...Whatever the motivation might have been, it appears that the ESIS team focused on identifying the negative influences that Agbobbloshie's continued presence would have on KLERP..."

In response, residents of Old Fadama and Agbobbloshie marshaled a series of discursive and tactical strategies in protest. They employed both *invented and invited* discursive arenas to enter and challenge the KLERP process forcefully. Apart from the street protests, the residents, with support from the Center for Public Interest Law and the Center for Housing Rights and Evictions (COHRE), filed a lawsuit appealing the May 2002 evictions (Afenah, 2009; COHRE, 2004). These struggles slowed down and increased the cost and completion of the KLERP, but ultimately the Accra High Court rejected the eviction.

During the period of contestation, two advocacy groups – the Ghana Federation of the Urban Poor (GHAFUP) and the People's Dialogue (PD) on Human Settlements – also entered the fray to elevate the marginalized voices in the KLERP process. First, GHAFUP and PD co-constructed a collective-choice arena (a public sphere) for consensus building and resolving conflicting incentives among local planners, other national and local government officials, the project contractor for KLERP, and the hitherto marginalized local voices, including residents, business owners, and property owners of the settlements. Second, GHAFUP and PD worked with residents to conduct a community-driven enumeration about the residents' living conditions in Old Fadama/Agbobbloshie in 2004 and 2006-2007 (Farouk and Owusu, 2012). This community-generated information was publicly shared with other actors, which led to a consensus among all actors to move from the politics of eviction to developing and adopting a participatory relocation and rehabilitation plan (Farouk and Owusu, 2012; Lepawsky and Akese, 2015). GHAFUP and PD also trained residents in the negotiation and mediation skills needed to build trust, legitimacy, sincerity, and honesty in public discourses around the KLERP.

The actions of GHAFUP and PD constituted rules for dialogues, information sharing, and intersubjective learning, which were critical to engineering a bottom-up CCP process

around the KLERP. This process eventually led to *procedural* (respect, mutual learning, sincerity), and *substantive* (assisted relocation and rehabilitation of residents) *outcomes*, all constituting a shared goal about the KLERP. Thus, from 2003 to 2008, the KLERP proceeded, residents were no longer under the threat of eviction, and all actors involved began to play by CCP rules built through consensus – that a participatory relocation and rehabilitation plan would be followed to relocate residents of Old Fadama and Agbogbloshie.

The grassroots dialogic and collaborative processes between 2003 and 2008 seemed to have allowed residents' entry into the KLERP process, helped in realigning incentives facing stakeholders, and temporally transformed hierarchical interactions into horizontal, consensus-based relationships among government, residents, and other stakeholders. However, the 2008 elections brought a new government into power, reminding everyone about the messiness of bottom-up CCP processes in global South contexts. This reminder is discussed in the third and last polycentric lesson.

Information and power (a)symmetries within the KLERP

While the grassroots dialogic and collaborative process between 2003 and 2008 may have helped realign incentives among stakeholders, they never addressed the underlying (1) incentive structure facing government stakeholders, and (2) information and power asymmetries rooted within Ghana's top-down planning regimes and political culture. Similar to the NPP government in the early 2000s, the newly elected National Democratic Congress (NDC) government also faced identical political and financial incentives to restore the lagoon and service the loan secured for the KLERP. After the 2008 elections, the newly appointed mayor of Accra embarked on an ambitious eviction and demolishing exercise to clear the Old Fadama/Agbogbloshie area, an initiative directly aligned with the newly elected government's 'authoritarian high-modernist' (see [Scott, 1998](#)) plan to beautify the Accra cityscape. This beautification vision was also in line with the ESIS recommendations, codified into the city's Master Plan in 2002.

It soon became clear to residents that they had to generate and share information once again with the newly formed government. This new information commons involved restarting the process of rebuilding a communicatively rational deliberation process to engage residents and the newly appointed government actors, such as the newly appointed mayor of Accra and other national-level government officials, in dialogues with the hope of re-establishing the *procedural* and *substantive outcomes* achieved with the previous government actors between 2003 and 2008. It required mobilizing and retraining residents to collect new data about the conditions in Old Fadama and Agbogbloshie, convening arenas for discussions, including ensuring that the right government stakeholders were present in these arenas, and (re)interpreting community-driven information to address distorted information and imaginaries held by the newly elected and appointed government officials about the communities and their residents. For example, residents in Old Fadama/Agbogbloshie, with the support of GHAFUP and PD, organized another community-driven enumeration in 2009 to generate and share information with the newly appointed mayor of Accra and other

newly elected national government actors who were now overseeing the KLERP process. A March 2012 study found community activists optimistic about brokering a strong deliberative and negotiation process between the government and residents, but it also found that some residents had lost faith in these community organizations and the public sphere they helped construct (Morrison, 2017).

What lay beneath the surface of these grassroots dialogic processes since 2003 was information and power asymmetries tied to the institutional-cultural context of the KLERP, which the third polycentric lesson offers. Reflecting Watson's (2014) argument that the power of local community groups lies in their information base, the GHAFUP, PD, and other community activists leveraged community-generated information and their framing power to forcefully enter the state's discursive and decision arenas around the KLERP to negotiate on behalf of residents. However, some residents' perceived some of these community leaders as opportunistic: they were leveraging information from community and government sources for personal benefits through political patronage, imbuing in these leaders *de facto pragmatic power* to decide what projects or decisions got implemented or sabotaged in these communities (see Morrison, 2017).

The limits to CCP in the KLERP became apparent. The grassroots dialogic processes since 2003 did not address the disproportionate concentration of information and power within the national government and its parastatals, including the AMA. Instead, these local dialogic and collaborative processes allowed the government to tactically deploy its *do nothing approach*—not evicting residents in Old Fadama/Agbogbloshie until it was strategically convenient to do so. To some scholars, this approach characterizes how the state has tactically handled the people and challenges in Old Fadama/Agbogbloshie since the 1960s (Amoako, 2016), putting the government in the position to dictate how and when to exercise the rules of the top-down planning game (Morrison, 2017).

Less known to the other stakeholders, the AMA and central government officials held on to vital information, catching residents and other stakeholders off guard when they decided to evict, demolish, and reclaim parts of Old Fadama/Agbogbloshie for the KLERP in 2015. Following one of the devastating flooding and fire outbreak incidents in Accra, on June 20, 2015, the AMA demolished buildings and evicted residents of this area with the help of the police and military personnel. Ghana's land and planning laws, specifically the 1972 Limitations Decree (NRC 54), allowed settlers to claim title, rights, and compensations to land after occupying an area for 12 years. Knowing (but withholding information) that 2015 marked the 12-year rule for residents to claim such rights and compensations, the AMA acted swiftly to demolish buildings and evict residents from the banks of the lagoon and created a 100m buffer space to begin dredging the lagoon as part of the KLERP process (Lepawsky and Akese, 2015; Morrison, 2017). The June 2015 eviction illustrated when the deeply rooted information and power asymmetries within Ghana's top-down planning institutional-cultural context met a *window of opportunity* (flooding crisis), unleashing the full force of the state on residents and residences in Old Fadama/Agbogbloshie.

Conclusion: Theoretical insights and implications for future research

Returning to our question, can communicative and collaborative processes address asymmetric power structures and socio-economic differences in planning the urban commons? Actors agency analysis suggests that the KLERP illustrates the absence or insufficiency of CCP. This insight partly explains the story here. Why was CCP insufficient for addressing asymmetric power structures and socio-economic differences in this commons planning project? Can the goals of CCP be realized within the KLERP's highly centralized institutional-cultural context? Described below, the three insights gleaned from putting CCP into dialogue with polycentric governance, and illustrated through the KLERP, contextualize how bottom-up dialogic and collaborative processes get circumscribed within the messiness of Ghana's highly centralized institutional-cultural context.

First, analyzing planning through polycentricity permits treating planning as a context-defined system with interconnected parts (such as actors, incentives, rules, information, discursive and decision arenas, and forms of power relations). Context comprehension illuminates limitations of normative planning theories that are not mitigated through rational dialogic collaborative processes. For instance, understanding the KLERP case context revealed the ways initiating, entering, and exiting a planning process are not just a matter of exercising agency. These actions are also a function of how the rules of a top-down planning 'game' structure and legitimize decision arenas, uphold (distorted) information and discourses that work to exclude (dissenting) voices, and build consensus around a priori-determined state actions. The internal dynamics and issues around which consensus is formed within CCP processes vary by institutional-cultural context, thereby exposing planning processes as *insufficiently* collaborative and communicative if they are (mis)aligned with overarching institutional-cultural contexts. In other words, the (in)sufficiency of CCP's normative goals within planning processes are contextually determined and legitimized.

Second, local grassroots organizations' co-production of public spheres/civic realms is a double-edged sword within top-down planning regimes. The KLERP case affirms arguments that resorting to opportunistic and not-so-democratic discourses and patronage practices is part of the everyday strategy of "tactical bricolage" employed by these organizations to give voice and secure material and political resources for poor communities in global South contexts (Robins et al., 2008; Watson, 2014). This case also highlights the dark underbelly of tactical bricolage: the co-constitution of civic realms by civil society groups where everyday discourses and political survival are socially co-produced, but with material and political gains becoming increasingly private. Watson (2003) raised concerns about CCP's blind faith in civil society groups as it fosters the misreading of the tensions and tradeoffs between distributive politics and identity politics within bottom-up CCP processes, especially in global South contexts. As the initiators of local grassroots dialogic processes learn to better mediate government requests from above and residents' concerns from below, the public sphere begins to look more like a power sphere, where "power games" and incentives among stakeholders (see Flyvbjerg

and Richardson, 2002) are integral to constituting what Roy (2009) described as “civic governmentality.” A polycentric lens raises concerns about how power relations (power by design, framing power, and pragmatic power) are reconfigured within a public sphere, positioning particular stakeholders as opportunistic information brokers who leverage the chasm between the state and its residents, sometimes for private gain.

Lastly, situating this analysis within a long-term planning project introduces temporal dimensions to CCP processes that provide opportunities to observe how the institutional-cultural context of a planning game impacts CCP dynamics over time. The KLERP starts as a highly centralized, state-sponsored process, shifts to something akin to the CCP process à la Healey (1997, 1999); and Forester (1999a, b); and later breaks down from shifts within the institutional-cultural context. Such dynamics cannot be wished away by simply paying attention to whether stakeholders and/or discursive arenas embodied sufficient rational dialogic collaborative processes. This point is especially the case in global South contexts where state-resident relationships are often more conflictual than collaborative, with deep-rooted colonial vestiges of mistrust, coercion, and patronage. Planning within these contexts becomes a long marathon, with assemblage of emerging challenges that evades one-size-fits-all normative solutions. Thoughtful planning within these contexts requires trial-and-error experimentation where diverse rules are continuously co-produced between the state and residents and changed over time to ensure an *institutional fit* between the challenges addressed and the institutional-cultural context structuring the entry and exit, incentives, interactions, and information and power asymmetries facing stakeholders (cf. Young, 2002; Ostrom, 2005). The normative goals of such co-produced polycentric planning processes represent an ongoing intellectual inquiry attentive to the particularities of people and places within a planning culture.

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