The Local Politics of Sustainable Residential Construction: Towards A New Framework for the Study of Ecological Modernisation

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Abstract

Local government is often assumed to play little role in legislating for a process of ecological modernisation and is therefore under-theorised in the literature. However in the case of residential construction local government has important powers to initiate a process of ecological modernisation. This study develops a framework to account for the dynamics of that process. It draws upon a model of environmental policy capacity to argue that institutional rules, networks of actors, logics of appropriate behaviour and the prevalence of ecological rationality are likely to influence local processes of EM. By engaging with these literatures and discussing their relationship to processes of ecological modernisation I outline a number of hypotheses for future empirical research.
In recent years Local Authorities have been granted autonomy by central government to impose standards for sustainable construction that go beyond those set nationally (DCLG, 2007). They are thus important actors in a broader process of ‘ecological modernisation’ (EM) within the construction sector, in which (as I will outline in more detail below) the state legislates to bring together private sector actors, market mechanisms and innovative eco-technologies in order to establish environmental protection and economic growth in a positive-sum relationship (Mol, 1995; 1996; Mol & Sonnonfeld, 2000). However, the extent to which Local Authorities (LA) are embracing the autonomy to impose stringent sustainable construction regulations – and thus the extent to which they are legislating for ecological modernisation – varies across the country. Why is this?

This paper begins by arguing that we are not at the stage in either our theorisations of the politics of sustainable construction or the politics of ecological modernisation where we can answer this question. I highlight two limitations in particular. First, the literature on sustainable housing has yet to study the dynamics of local adoption of targets and there are few indications in empirical work on the most likely barriers and enablers to action. Second, because local government is not typically tasked with legislating for ecological modernisation there is a gap in our theoretical understanding of what factors affect its propensity to do so.

I argue in the second section of this paper that a new framework of analysis is therefore needed, one that can explain both the politics of local sustainable construction targets and the barriers and enablers faced by local government in legislating for ecological modernisation.

The purpose of this paper is thus to draw upon this problematization and outline such a framework. In doing so, the third section draws upon the environmental policy capacity
model, first developed by Weidner & Jänicke (2002), to develop a series of hypotheses. The environmental policy capacity model focuses attention on agency, institutional rules and structural context, emphasising the inter-connectedness between them and it is on this basis four hypotheses are outlined: a network governance hypothesis, a logic of appropriateness hypothesis, an ecological rationality hypothesis and an economic success hypothesis.

I conclude by suggesting that this framework should guide future studies of both local sustainable construction policy and local government’s attempts to facilitate process of EM. However I am pragmatic about the explanatory powers of this framework. Because it rests upon particular assumptions about what ecological modernisation is and of the most important dynamics implicit in process of local policy making, it is one interpretive lens through which both processes can be viewed. We should not expect it to give us a complete explanatory picture and should instead research the phenomenon from varying perspectives to achieve the requisite explanatory complexity necessary to draw greater inferences about the local politics of ecological modernisation.

Section One: Sustainable Homes, Local Authorities and Ecological Modernisation

Encouraged by the fact that an estimated 27% of the UK's carbon emissions are associated with house-building and by a binding target to reduce emissions by 80% by 2050, the UK government announced in 2006 a target for all new housing in England to be 'zero-carbon' by 2016 (McManus, Gaterell & Coates, 2010; Scott, Jones & Webb, 2014; Rydin, 2012).
Three mechanisms were introduced to help meet this target. First the government announced a progressive reform of Part L of the National Building Regulations – which regulates the conservation of fuel and power – to mandate progressively stricter targets over time. Second, it published the Code for Sustainable Homes (CSH), which provides technical guidance for developers and allows buildings to be rated according to a number of criteria (including, amongst other things, carbon emissions, renewable energy, water, pollution, health and well-being, ecology, water and waste) on a scale of one to six. One star, although being entry level, is above building regulations in terms of sustainability and six stars reflects 'exemplar development in sustainability terms' (DCLG: 2006). The changes to Part L that are to be gradually rolled out reflect the carbon emissions targets of the code. However, compliance with the CSH as a whole, beyond these carbon targets, is voluntary.

Importantly, third, national government published a Planning Policy Statement on Planning and Climate Change, which gave Local Authorities autonomy to set local targets for new development that go beyond Part L targets by mandating specific levels of the CSH in their local jurisdiction (DCLG, 2007). This has the effect of giving Local Authorities the option of making the CSH as a whole mandatory in their areas. This makes them important actors in the transition towards sustainable construction.

The provision of sustainable housing suffers from a collective action problem and to achieve increases in sustainability government policy is the most effective route. Osmani & O'Reilley (2009) surveyed a sample of developers to establish the barriers and enablers to voluntary compliance of the CSH, and when asked to give examples of a driver to compliance 95% pointed to environmental legislation and regulations (p. 1920). Developers acknowledge the need for sustainable construction methods and the benefits for broader efforts to mitigate the impact of climate change, but are unwilling to invest the necessary resources to construct homes to higher sustainability standards on a voluntary basis.
Similarly, whilst householders feel positive about the importance of sustainable construction and post-construction measures they are unwilling to invest their own resources in order to obtain them (Scott, Jones & Webb, 2014).

This makes government a powerful actor in ensuring that the sustainability of the UK's housing stock increases in the future. However at the national level the willingness to make the Code mandatory is weak (A. Warren, personal communication, 9th December 2013). So far the only area to be tackled is the carbon emissions element of the code, although recent announcements by the coalition government have watered down the proposed changes to Part L that would see a strengthening of the targets to bring them in line with Code Level 4. This casts serious doubt over the extent to which central government is on course to make all new homes 'zero-carbon' by 2016.

When we see an increasing number of local authorities voluntarily enforcing the CSH, and therefore mandating more stringent regulations than those at the national level, we should take this seriously and ask what factors enable and constrain their decisions to do so.

However, in asking what factors accompany the voluntary enforcement of the CSH we are faced with the problem that there has been little empirical work carried out on the politics of sustainable homes, not least from a local government perspective and, as a result, we simply do not know what factors encourage or inhibit a Local Authority to implement it. Where the CSH has been discussed in the non-technical literature it has been done so in relation to the demand side (Scott, et.al., 2014), the supply side (Williams & Dair, 2007; Osmani & O'Reilley, 2009) or with reference to its green-credentials (McManus, Gaterell & Coates, 2010). Indeed, that there is variation in uptake at the local level at all has only fleetingly been mentioned (Goodchild & Walshaw, 2011), and even then with no indication of which Local Authorities might be considered to be the strongest performers.
This reflects a broader under-theorization of local government in the literature on ecological modernisation (EM). EM is a descriptive term used to account for a conscious program of socio-political reform designed to stimulate the integration of novel sustainable technological solutions with innovative market mechanisms in order to stimulate the greening of growth (Mol, 1995; 1996; Mol & Sonnonfeld, 2000). The changes to the legislative framework surrounding the provision of sustainable housing are an attempt to stimulate a process ecological modernisation (EM).

Core to the theory of ecological modernisation is that processes of EM are accompanied by a realignment of the relationship, and roles, of the state, market and science and technological industries. Aside from the normative discussions surrounding the desirability or possibility of an ecological phase of modernity that characterised early discussions (Christoff, 1996; Mol & Sonnonfeld, 2000), emphasis in the mid-1990s focused on explaining examples of ecological modernisation. It was, and still is, argued that new industrial processes (driven by innovations in science and technology) can be harnessed by the market in the provision of collective goods to achieve sustainable ends, and that the state must act as to enable that harnessing (Mol, 1995).

It is primarily then a theory of private sector organizational change in pursuit of the economization of ecology and the ‘ecologization’ of existing economic practice through the mainstreaming (and monetization) of eco-technologies. The role of the state in this context changes from curative and reactive to preventive…and from dirigise to contextual steering’ (Mol, 1996, 314, emphasis original). The state delegates the implementation of the ecological modernisation agenda to industrial actors and only acts to pave their way.

We can notice this pattern in the role of national government in attempts to ecologically modernize the residential construction sector. Its proposals to reform Part L Building Regulations progressively towards a ‘zero-carbon’ target provides the requisite
contextual steering for private sector developers to mainstream sustainable building technologies and practices on an increasing scale. They do not prescribe the type of construction methods or technologies that must be used, instead only the targets that must be met.

However, by granting considerable autonomy to local government to impose more stringent regulations the national government has involved the local level of government in the ecological modernisation process to a great extent. Since the publication of the *Brundtland Report* in 1987, which highlighted the importance of the local space to address the challenges posed by sustainable development, local authorities have been granted responsibility for *delivering* EM policies in areas as diverse as waste through to transport (Bulkeley & Betsill, 2005). However, in this case because they are granted autonomy in how they apply sustainable planning policies local authorities have responsibility for *administering* EM policies rather than just implementing them according to central government’s wishes.

This presents problems for our current understanding of the role of the state in processes of EM, and our understanding of the dynamics of particular processes of EM. Our current theorisations are inadequate, and greater consideration is needed to explaining the factors that encourage or inhibit local governments in legislating for EM.

*Second Two: Towards A Theorisation of Local Ecological Modernization*

We have so far established that because LAs have an important role to play in the proliferation of sustainable housing the varying extents to which they implement stringent sustainable construction needs to explaining. We then saw that there have been no attempts within the literature on sustainable construction to offer an explanation for this. Then we
defined EM, situated this as an example of EM and highlighted a gap in our theorisations of EM concerning the role played by local government.

This paper set out to develop a framework to account for the barriers and enablers to stringent local sustainable construction targets, but on the basis of the above discussion we can use this opportunity to simultaneously develop a more comprehensive framework that accounts for local government’s role in processes of ecological modernisation.

On this basis it is apt to look towards the literature on ecological modernisation for direction when developing the framework.

The most sustained effort to account for the propensity of the state to legislate for ecological modernisation (albeit with a focus on the national level) was developed by in Helmut Weidner & Martin Jänicke. Underlying their model of ‘environmental policy capacity’ was the belief that ‘successful environmental protection is brought about by a complex interaction of influences and not by a single, isolated factor, nor a favourite instrument, nor a single type of actor, nor a particular framework condition or institution’ (2002, 4). Therefore they focused on; the organisation and behaviour of proponents and opponents of change, the situative context, institutional rules and problem structures (ibid), the relationship between each of whom is depicted in in Figure One, below. The multifactorialism underlying public policy outcomes has been emphasised elsewhere, most notably in the literature on local government innovation (see Osborne, 1998; Osborne & Brown, 2011) and public policy implementation (Sabatier, 1988). Any attempt to deploy the model here must then be sensitive then to the inter-relation of these various factors.

Section Three: Hypotheses

Given the absence of explicit discussion on the role of local government in processes of EM I take this model as a starting point in the construction of explicit hypotheses and engage
with literature not just on ecological modernisation, but also that which discusses institutionalism, problem structure and network governance. The hypotheses I develop should be read in the context of the environmental capacity model; that is, they are inter-dependent and not design to be verified or falsified in the positivist sense but instead to be used as sensitizing devices in the course of empirical application.

![Figure 1: Determinant of Environmental Capacity](Source: Weidner & Jänicke, 2002, 5)

**Resource Exchange**

A feature of processes of ecological modernisation is an increased interaction between network actors in pursuit of policy aims, with the state seeking negotiation from private and society actors. Processes of ecological modernisation have been under-pinned by increased cooperation and deliberation between state and market, fuelled both by a recognition that command-and-control bureaucratic interventionist policies of the 1970s
onwards had failed in their objectives and that the complex nature of environmental problems demands the expertise of market and civil society actors (Mol, 1995; 1996).

Bureaucratic, dirigistic and top-down environmental policy based on public law, the key trigger of environmental reform in the 1970s, has been replaced to some extent by a policy model or ‘style’ that is more oriented towards regular consultations and negotiations with industry, a growing effort on the part of industry in policy implementation and stimulation of self-regulation.

(Mol, 1996, 366)

If a government wants to legislate for ecological modernisation it needs the assistance of groups in the creation, adoption and implementation stages of the policy process (Compston, 2009). The relationship between these groups is characterised by Rhodes (1990) on a continuum from loose collections of actors in issue networks to highly organised and restrictive policy communities, characterised by stable relationships, highly restrictive memberships and which are based upon the major functional interests of government – in this case planning policy. The most important network actors in this case are likely to be developers and associations of house builders, planning departments, the council executive, pro-environmental NGOs, sustainable construction groups (including professionals such as niche house builders or architects) and national statutory bodies (such as the Energy Saving Trust).

The accompanying theory of policy networks tells us that a core determinate of outcomes in this kind of network governance is the resourcefulness of network actors and the exchange of resources across the network itself (Sørenson & Torfing, 2008; Compston, 2009, Rhodes 1990). Private network actors possess resources that public actors need:
information, veto power, cooperation with implementation, political support, legal challenge and private investment. Similarly, public network actors possess resources that private actors need: policy concessions and access to the policy making process (Compston, 2009). Resource-exchange is therefore an important variable to consider when studying policy outcomes (ibid).

Yet because the resource of one network actor only takes on meaning when it is desired by another we must also be sensitive to the resource-dependencies that exist between actors. If a Local Authority possesses limited technical knowledge of sustainable construction methods, or needs considerable assistance with implementation then it is likely to turn to one or more policy network actors. These actors, in return for offering expertise or cooperation are likely to demand concessions or access in return. Similarly a legislator with a slim majority is less likely to deny concessions or access to a network actor that can mobilize a large constituency of voters than one with a large majority.

Policy networks and processes of resource exchange do not automatically emerge in policy areas but are usually formed as a result of – and around – the work of policy champions who, whether empowered for personal or altruistic reasons, expend considerable resources to furthering a policy ideal, navigating the policy process and connecting issues to problems and relevant actors (Kingdon, 1984; Bartlett & Dibbon, 2002). Policy entrepreneurship and innovation ‘necessarily go hand-in-hand in the local government context’ (Bartlett & Dibbon, 2002, 119) because there is considerable scope for policy champions to develop policy networks, integrate new members and encourage the flow of resources across them (Mintrom & Norma, 2009), all of which have been shown above to be integral to the public policy process.

However, defining policy making in terms of resource exchange and dependencies presupposes that there are groups in possession of resources, and that those resources can
and will be deployed if they are possessed. To overcome this determinism we must be sensitive to the mobilization of resources within a group and to the theory of resource mobilization, which asserts that the extent to which the resources of a group can be used in networked interactions is a product of the extent to which the can be mobilized by the group itself (McCarthay & Zald, 1977).

This requires us to focus on issues such as the degree of connectedness within a network and the amount of resources available to an organization (ibid.). An organization which has a highly connected membership which frequently interacts and which has considerable in-house resources (whether administrative, technical, information or financial) is more likely to be able to mobilize their network resources than one which has a highly fragmented membership with infrequent interaction and limited in house resources, in spite of whether it has significant network resources or otherwise.

We must also though be sensitive to the openness of the political input structure to the voices of outsiders, for it is likely to affect the extent to which these peripheral and outsider proponents of sustainable housing can engage in resource exchanges with other network actors and influence policy outcomes.

If studies of national level planning policy issue networks are anything to go by developers and consortiums of house-builders are likely to already have a close relationship with local government and be central members of the network prior to any reform to the sustainability of policy being proposed by Local Authority (Rydin, 2012). This stems from the centrality that housing and planning play in the day-to-day legislative function of Local Authorities (Wilson & Game, 2006).

Conversely, though, opponents of change are more likely to be on the periphery of the network or outside it completely given that they many of them are niche groups focused
around the specific issue of sustainable homes (Middlemiss & Parish, 2010; Seyfang, 2010; Seyfang & Haxeltine, 2012).

The theory of political opportunity structure states that a key determinant in explaining policy outcome variation is the political input structure, ‘the openness of political regimes to new demands on the input side’ (Kitschelt, 1986, 63). The greater the openness of a government to the voices and interests of organisations outside or on the periphery of policy networks the greater the likelihood that those organisations will be able to engage in a process of resource exchange, *ceteris paribus*. Openness in this context is defined by the level of dialogue between the executive and interest groups, mechanisms in place to aggregate demands, the number and cohesiveness of political parties and the independence of the legislature from the executive body. In a closed system outsiders and peripheral groups face greater difficulties engaging with existing policy networks and therefore face greater difficulties influencing policy outcomes.

I can therefore infer the first hypothesis: *The propensity of a Local Authority to legislate for ecological modernisation increases when public actors a) are more dependent upon the resources proponents of change than they are on those of opponents b) where policy champions work to further the EM policy and c) when proponents are comparatively better able to both mobilize their resources and become part of established policy networks than opponents.*

*Logic of Appropriateness*

However this exchange of resources does not take place in an institutional void. Resource exchange is subject to policy network-specific rules and norms (Compston, 2009),
which condition the resonance of particular policy demands and which therefore have an important determinant effect on outcome.

New theories of institutionalism, particularly the sociological strand, are useful in explaining how these rules and norms limit the behaviour of actors in that they ‘stress the central role of values and symbols in defining an institution and in guiding the behaviour of its members’ (Peters, 2005, 111). Rather than assume that preferences are formed exogenously to policy network interactions it is assumed that the process of interaction itself has a significant impact upon the preferences of actors (March & Olsen, 1984; DiMaggio & Powell, 1984). Interests and preferences are thus said to be formed endogenously to the institution (albeit with different approaches questioning the ratio between endogenous and exogenous preference formation).

Central to this theorisation is the logic of appropriateness, a perspective that sees behaviour being driven by a perception of what is deemed appropriate or exemplary, given the current and historical context of the institution (March & Olsen, 1984). Institutional forms, procedures and outcomes in this view do not emerge because they are the most ‘rational’ or the most ‘efficient’, but instead:

[s]hould be seen as culturally-specific practices, akin to the myths and ceremonies devised by many societies, and assimilated into organizations, not necessarily to enhance their formal means-ends efficiency, but as a result of the kind of processes associated with the transmission of cultural practices more generally.

Hall & Taylor, 1996, 946-7

Actor preference formation is therefore not exogenous to the institution but rather are formed on the basis of what is seen as natural, legitimate or appropriate in the context of the
institutional identity. What an actor sees as rational behaviour is socially constituted through the institution, ‘if rational choice theorists often posit a world of individuals or organisations seeking to maximize their material well-being, sociologists frequently posit a world of individuals or organizations seeking to define and express their identity in socially appropriate ways’ (ibid, 949).

We can therefore talk of the importance of a culture and history of sustainability within the Local Authority’s policy record. If sustainability has become the typical approach to policy making in other areas in the past, this will have an effect on the preferences of policy makers in the present and future. Similarly, ecological modernisation entails a degree of innovation by governments, so we can talk of the importance of a history of innovation.

However, a culture of sustainability and innovation is not just important in conditioning responses inside government. If a widely shared norm of sustainability and innovative planning exists within the general populace then proponent network actors will find it much easier to mobilize support (Kitschelt, 1986) and the power of opponents is more likely to be curbed, ceteris paribus.

Hypothesis number four therefore suggests that: The propensity of a Local Authority to legislate for ecological modernisation is higher when it has a history of sustainable policy making and innovativeness in its approach to the provision of public goods, and where a culture of innovation and sustainability exists within the general population.

Ecological Rationality

However, the emergence of policy networks forming around an issue and the formation of the preferences of actors within that network presupposes that actors consider

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1 We must not be quick to imply a deterministic relationship between proponent involvement and stringent targets, and therefore must consider that whilst a relationship may exist between political input structures and stringent sustainable construction regulations the extent to which any involvement of proponent groups leads to stringent regulations is determined by an interaction of the other hypotheses developed in this framework.
there to be a problem which can be addressed through policy (Compston, 2009). The structure of the problem being addressed, thus, is important to consider.

The extent to which the state legislates for the provision of environmental protection, whether innovative or not, is determined in part by the intrinsic nature of the problem (whether it is difficult or easy to solve) and in part by the perception the polity has of the problem (whether it is urgent or not). A problem that is easy to solve and which is considered urgent by a state is likely to be the subject of legislation, whereas a problem that is either considered unimportant or more difficult to solve is less likely.

Kingdon (1984) shows that problems become the focus of policy when they violate existing values. It is conceivable then that Local Authorities that have sympathy with the logic of ecological modernisation as a direction for environmental policy making can be said to be more sympathetic to the demands of network actors (played out through resource exchanges, as argued above) to the extent that the priority of ecological modernisation as a policy direction increases. Where a local government is given the option to foster the ecological modernisation of an industrial sector by central government and it has ideological sympathy with the logic of de-industrialisation rather than ecological modernisation (see Schnaiberg, 1980) we can expect to see little or no engagement with its autonomy. Conversely where we see sympathy with the logic of EM we can expect to see the issue higher on the agenda.

The most visual manifestation of an EM logic in a decision making body is the frequency with which decisions are made with ecological criteria in mind. In these cases we would see environmental issues shifting from the periphery to the core of decision-making. A newly emancipated sphere of ‘ecological’ rationality’ thus begins to sit alongside traditional economic, political or social rationale for and against decisions such that, in
organisations that have embraced an EM agenda, decisions are increasingly made on the basis of economic, political, social and ecological criteria (Mol, 1996).

However, this is not meant to suggest that outcomes directed at stimulating EM occur as a direct result of an emancipated sphere of ecological rationality. Instead it is seen as a precursor to a process of resource-exchange outlined above. A key influence in policy making are policy champions, who devote considerable resources to further a policy ideal and navigate it through the dual processes of network governance and resource exchanges. In an organization that has embraced the logic of ecological modernisation we can expect to see the empowerment of ecological policy champions who, when faced with a conflict between economic and ecological interests, ‘try to alter the prevailing rules and the impact of the resources they have at their disposal’ (Mol, 1995, 362). The extent to which they are able to do this is contingent upon this EM problem structure.

This implies that the extent to which a Local Authority both wishes to engage in an EM process and the importance that is attached to network actors’ resources is contingent upon the degree to which it has embraced the EM rhetoric because this affects the priority it gives to the opinions and resources of policy champions, proponents and opponents.

A third hypothesis can therefore be inferred: The propensity of a Local Authority to legislate for ecological modernisation in a given policy area when given the chance increases if the Local Authority is sympathetic to the internal logic of the ecological modernisation project and forms decisions on the basis of ecological criteria, as well as economic, political or social.

Economic Framework Conditions

In their model of environmental policy capacity Weidner & Jänicke (2002) also talk about economic-technological framework conditions – ‘the performance, technological
standard, sectoral composition, or general availability of raw materials’ (p. 7) – being a necessary variable in explanations of the propensity for national government legislate for ecological modernisation.

Wealth is an important variable to consider in this context as it has been shown elsewhere to influence; the level of awareness of environmental issues in the general population and - because of network governance - the government (Weidner & Jänicke, 2002), the resourcefulness of proponent groups (McCarthay & Zald, 1977) and the propensity to ecologically modernise (Mol, 1996). Higher levels of wealth are associated with higher levels of awareness amongst the general public, which lead to an increase in both the absolute number of environmental proponent groups and the membership of existing groups. The voice with which these organisations speak subsequently increases, along with their resources. Through resource exchanges and dependencies it is easy to see how an increase in wealth can lead to a change in policy outcomes.

In this context though the wealth of the council itself is of less concern that than that of the general population because the adoption of stringent sustainable planning regulations doesn’t entail a significant increase in operating costs. Regardless of the stringency of planning policy the infrastructure is already in place in Local Authorities to inspect property and planning applications. Requiring higher standards simply raises the expectations of planning officers, rather than requiring the employment of new ones.

A fourth, and final, hypothesis can therefore be inferred: *The propensity of a Local Authority to legislate for ecological modernisation is higher when the local GDP per capita is above average.*

**Conclusion**
In the course of this discussion two problems were outlined: one empirical and one theoretical. First, there is no indication within existing literature of the factors that encourage or inhibit local government engaging with their autonomy to adopt stringent sustainable construction legislation. Second, when related to the broader phenomenon of ecological modernisation there is an under-theorisation of the barriers and enablers faced by local government in legislating in pursuit of the ecological modernisation of a particular policy area. On that basis a framework based upon Weidnar & Jänicke’s model of environmental policy capacity has been developed that can overcome both problems. The framework was operationalized in this context using theories of network governance, resource dependency, resource mobilization, political input structure, new institutionalism and ecological modernisation. Four hypotheses were inferred which, for reference, are reiterated below:

Hypothesis One: The propensity of a Local Authority to legislate for ecological modernisation increases when public actors a) are more dependent upon the resources proponents of change than they are on those of opponents b) where policy champions work to further the EM policy and c) when proponents are comparatively better able to both mobilize their resources and become part of established policy networks than opponents.

Hypothesis Two: The propensity of a Local Authority to legislate for ecological modernisation is higher when it has a history of sustainable policy making and innovativeness in its approach to the provision of public goods, and where a culture of innovation and sustainability exists within the general population.

Hypothesis Three: The propensity of a Local Authority to legislate for ecological modernisation in a given policy area when given the chance increases if the Local Authority is sympathetic to the internal logic of the ecological modernisation project and forms decisions on the basis of ecological criteria, as well as economic, political or social.

Hypothesis Four: The propensity of a Local Authority to legislate for ecological modernisation is higher when the local GDP per capita is above average.

The framework does not claim to account for the full picture in the case of local government ecological modernisation, but instead on explaining the barriers and enablers to action at the local level in terms of local environmental policy capacity. Doing so focuses
our attention on the constellation and strategies of actors, on their situative contexts, structural conditions and institutional rules.

The best we can hope for our theories to do is to provide us with a snapshot of what’s going on in a particular scenario. We should not be under the illusion that we can explain the absolute cause of a social phenomenon, but instead should be sensitive to the enormous power of grand and meta theories of policy making - such as those deployed here in the context of policy capacity - in providing an interpretive lens through which to discuss events.

On that note the framework developed here is explicitly interpretive, and rooted firmly in a particular understanding of what ecological modernization is\(^2\), and in a particular assumptive understanding of the most relevant factors that can be studied in explanation of that process.

It is designed to complement other approaches to the study of ecological modernisation - which may focus on other aspects of the process or hold different assumptions about the scope of term itself – but to progress the discipline further by first highlighting a need for increased engagement with local EM processes and second offering my take on how we can undertake that engagement.

Future research will not just deploy and further refine this model, but will develop others to complement and sit alongside it in order to increase the density of our understanding of this particular process of ecological modernisation. It is only on that basis that we can make any attempt to claim we understand the process fully. This discussion has been an attempt to get that ball rolling.

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\(^2\) There is considerable disagreement within the discipline about the nature of EM and indeed on the validity of a unified EM theory (on this note see Christoff, 1996). Instead some talk of different types of EM, ranging from a descriptive term, a normative agenda, and a political program. The current use, clearly, is concurrent with the latter use.


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