



What role for climate pact ambassadors? A policy process perspective

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Abstract

The European Green Deal puts forth an ambitious agenda for a transition towards sustainable development. To this end, it embraces participatory governance and has even created a new tool for it: climate pact ambassadors (CPAs). CPAs either act on their own behalf or represent organisations that have made a publicly accessible pledge. They are expected to provide information on and support for climate action, as well as ‘inspire’ others in their networks and communities. Despite only being launched in December 2020, the European Commission has endorsed more than 850 CPAs (as of October 2022). What role can the CPAs play at the different stages of the policy cycle? How could their participation in pertinent policy processes become more effective? These are the two questions that guide this explorative analysis.

Keywords

Advocacy, Climate pact ambassadors, Communication, European Climate Pact, European Green Deal, Information, Participation, Public policy

Introduction

The EU and the world face grand challenges that threaten our welfare. Paramount among these problems is man-made climate change caused by burning fossil fuels. European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen has made climate change a top priority, as reflected in the adoption of the European Green Deal (EGD) in December 2019. For the first time, the Commission has placed climate and environmental policies at the centre of a policy framework for achieving sustainable development (Skjærseth 2021). The EGD

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aims to achieve no less than climate neutrality on the European continent by 2050, the decoupling of economic growth from resource use, and a socially just transition that leaves no person and no place behind. To underline the political commitment to this green transition agenda, Executive Vice-President of the Commission Frans Timmermans leads the activities for delivering on the EGD.

As the implementation of the EGD is still in its early stages, so, too, is research on it. In fact, several components are still in the process of being defined or concretised (Dupont and Torney 2021). One of the components that is in place is the European Climate Pact (ECP), which was launched on 9 December 2020. The ECP is a participatory framework that complements previous measures for facilitating and intensifying citizen involvement in the transformation towards sustainability, such as the European Citizens' Initiative (ECI) introduced by the Lisbon Treaty (see Tosun and Schaub 2021). However, compared to the ECI, the ECP provides a more specific but also low-threshold framework for citizen participation. It is more specific in comparison to the ECI as it invites individuals to take action to fight climate change and protect the environment. It is a low-threshold participatory tool because individual citizens can respond to the open call to become a climate pact ambassador (CPA), which is the main tool of the ECP.

On the ECP's website (EU n.d.), which represents the Commission's main communication platform and is therefore an essential information source for this analysis, CPAs are presented as actors who are responsible for informing, inspiring and supporting climate action in their communities and networks. This characterisation does not explicate how CPAs can participate in the policy processes of the EU's multilevel system if they wish to do so. Therefore, this brief analysis reflects on the CPAs' role in policymaking and identifies conditions under which they could be more influential. The latter issue appears particularly relevant since both the ECP and the role of the CPAs therein are still evolving.

Background to the CPA framework

The EU is not the first political system to experiment with climate ambassadors. Danish municipalities, for example, have instituted climate ambassadors to foster local-level climate action (Pedersen et al. 2020). However, the EU's approach to CPAs is different since it aims to stimulate climate action at various levels: local, national, and European.

Any individual located in an EU member state and interested in taking action on climate change can become a CPA. Likewise, organisations can be represented by an individual who becomes a CPA on their behalf. Individual CPAs are endorsed for a period of one year; organisational CPAs are initially endorsed for six months, with an extension to one year once the Commission has approved the respective organisation's climate pledge. CPAs can extend their role, but to do so they must report on their activities and, in the case of organisational CPAs, renew their pledge. The activities and pledges are expected to focus on the development of green areas, buildings and transport; the promotion of climate education; and the acquisition of green skills. At the time of writing, more than 850 individuals had signed up as CPAs with the European Commission.

Every CPA has to adhere to the six values of the ECP, of which the first refers to taking *concrete* climate action that is informed by *science*. The second value, *transparency*, entails the need to share relevant information on pertinent climate actions. Third, the Commission is keen to *discourage greenwashing* and therefore asks the organisational CPAs to make their pledges public. The ECP recognises the need for *ambition* and the *urgency* of climate action as the fourth value and therefore asks the CPAs to commit themselves to transformative solutions. Climate actions tailored to *local contexts* is the fifth value, and the sixth refers to committing to *diversity and inclusivity*.

On the ECP website (EU n.d.), the Commission assigns various roles to the CPAs. The first type of role relates to *communication* and the provision of *substantial information* on climate change. CPAs should reach out to individuals and/or organisations, as well as to their own networks and communities, and motivate them to become engaged in climate action. To achieve engagement in climate action, CPAs are expected to talk about different types of climate action and to share science-based knowledge on climate change by using different communication channels. A particularly important yet challenging aspect of the CPAs' role refers to engaging with vulnerable and deprived individuals in local communities in order to identify the most appropriate ways of communicating with them, which reflects the Commission's commitment to leaving no one behind in the transition process.

The second role of CPAs is providing *processual information*. In contrast to substantial information, which is about the characteristics of climate change and the content of climate policies, processual information refers to how climate action can be facilitated and carried out. CPAs are invited to engage in peer-to-peer training to help those who are interested in taking climate action but have refrained from doing so because they lack knowledge of how to proceed. Likewise, CPAs are expected to provide information to individuals or organisations already engaged in climate action on how to scale up their respective initiatives.

The third role of CPAs concerns *networking* and is about connecting climate activists with other relevant networks and stakeholders, as well as facilitating exchanges between civil society, stakeholders and the European Commission. A particularly noteworthy aspect of this role is that both horizontal (i.e. the same level) and vertical (i.e. across different levels) networking is encouraged.

The fourth role corresponds to *activism* in a narrower sense. CPAs are invited to organise activities related to fighting climate change and protecting the environment; to perform policy advocacy at the European, national, regional and local level; to make climate pledges; and to take different types of climate action.

The *testing* of climate solutions represents the fifth role as outlined by the European Commission. This role aligns with the literature on climate governance experiments at the local level, which have received increasing attention in the literature on the transition to sustainability (e.g. Kivimaa et al. 2017).

The sixth and last role refers to CPAs as those who *lead by example* and attempt to influence the behaviour of individuals or organisations by acting as role models for more ambitious climate action. This role is defined functionally but also normatively, and represents a strong behavioural imperative for the CPAs.

CPAs in the policy process

Policymaking is often studied from the perspective of the *policy cycle* (Lasswell 1956). This heuristic breaks policymaking into different activities, consisting of (1) agenda-setting, (2) policy formulation, (3) policy adoption, (4) implementation and (5) evaluation. An ideal-typical policymaking situation would begin with the identification of a societal problem and its placement on the agenda. Subsequently, policy proposals are formulated, from which one is adopted. In the next stage, the adopted policy is actioned. Finally, the impacts of the policy are evaluated. This last stage leads back to the first, indicating that the policy cycle is continuous. It should be noted though that in real-life policymaking situations, the sequence of the individual stages may be different from the ideal-typical model, and some stages may be skipped.

Agenda-setting refers to the identification of a societal problem requiring policymakers to intervene. There are many societal problems, but only a small number will be given official attention by policymakers. Those that are chosen constitute the political agenda. In addition to the political agenda, there also exists a public agenda that reflects public debates. Agenda-setting is an important source of power, and the factors determining whether an issue reaches the public or political agenda may be cultural, economic, ideological, political or social (Knill and Tosun 2020).

CPAs who choose to influence policymaking can contribute to agenda-setting at both the EU and the member-state level. At the level of the member states, CPAs can have an impact on both the political and the public agenda. Putting issues on the latter is more feasible than on the former. However, CPAs can, in principle, have an impact on the political agenda as well if they initiate or support citizens' initiatives that demand climate action from local or regional governments, for example. Likewise, CPAs can initiate or promote ECIs and call on the Commission to take climate action. For example, the youth movement Fridays for Future launched the ECI 'Actions on Climate Emergency', which called on the Commission to strengthen EU action on the climate emergency in line with the 1.5 °C warming limit stipulated in the Paris Agreement (Tosun and Schaub 2021).

Policy formulation involves the definition, discussion, and acceptance or rejection of feasible courses of action for coping with policy problems. Several EU member states have introduced deliberative formats for policy formulation, such as citizens' assemblies or juries at the local level. A case in point is the green participatory budgeting system implemented in the city of Lisbon. Deliberative formats provide CPAs with an opportunity to participate in policy formulation. At the EU level, the EU's public consultations provide a suitable format for CPAs to influence policy formulation.

The policy adoption stage effectively offers no room for CPAs to participate. In the member states, policy adoption takes place in parliaments after a policy proposal is put forth. At the EU level, the Council of the EU and the European Parliament co-decide on policy proposals initiated by the European Commission.

Policy implementation deals with how policies are put into practice by administrative actors and to what extent they affect the behaviour of a policy's target groups. Policy implementation consists of four dimensions: defining the implementation structure, agency decision-making, target group behaviour and policy results (Vancoppenolle et al. 2015).

The implementation structure refers to the number and types of organisations involved in the implementation process. Agency decision-making refers to the process of making the legal stipulations more concrete and therefore implementable. Target group behaviour refers to the role the policy addressees play in the implementation process. Policy results are the outcome of the implementation process.

In terms of the components of the implementation model, CPAs are most likely to influence the behaviour of the policy's target groups. One of the arguments advanced in the literature is that individuals fail to change their behaviour because they lack information or because the information provided is not accessible to them. CPAs could help by providing information on climate change. And they could be even more effective in stimulating behaviour change by engaging with local communities and stakeholders (Nadkarni et al. 2019) and achieving a higher level of acceptance for policies. Recalling the CPAs' roles listed above, one of them was to lead by example. This role relates to the implementation stage, too, since it builds on the premise that the CPAs change their own behaviour in accordance with the stipulations of climate policies.

The evaluation stage is about assessing whether a public policy has attained the intended goals. Evaluation can be carried out in different ways including *formal* evaluations (monitoring of routine tasks), *outcome* evaluation (achievement of the intended outcomes) and *cost-benefit* evaluation (comparison of costs and outcomes or impacts of a policy) (Knill and Tosun 2020). Policy evaluation provides a feedback loop which enables policymakers to draw lessons from the policies in operation. This feedback loop identifies new problems and sets in motion the policymaking process once again.

CPAs can collect information on how climate policies perform on the ground and thereby contribute to evaluation. Whether this information is indeed used by the European Commission or national authorities depends on the access CPAs have to them. CPAs who represent national, regional or local governments, for example, will be most likely to feed back their insights to other policymakers. CPAs who act on their own are less likely to share their experience with policymakers.

The impact of CPAs will depend on the political opportunity structures of the EU member state in which they reside. That being said, CPAs can still be expected to have the greatest chance of influencing policy processes at the local level. However, tangible

effects on policy should realistically only be expected from CPAs who are part of organisations or collectives. It appears unlikely that CPAs acting in their own right will be in a position to arouse (sustained) political interest in climate change. Therefore, CPAs should be encouraged to form broader networks.

In addition to facilitating the formation of different types of networks, a central unit that provides CPAs with relevant substantial and processual information on climate action would increase their impact on policymaking (Pedersen et al. 2020). Furthermore, to stimulate lesson-drawing and policy learning, it is important to collect and analyse CPAs' experiences in a systematic fashion. On the ECP website, the Commission states that it expects the CPAs to report on their realised activities, but this does not automatically mean that their experiences will be assessed systematically with a view to drawing lessons from the insights they have gained throughout their term. Consequently, the Commission would be well advised to develop bidirectional communication mechanisms to prepare CPAs adequately for their role as well as to ensure that the feedback from CPAs on the on-the-ground effects of climate is processed effectively in future policymaking.

Conclusion

Climate change poses an existential threat not only to the EU but to the world as a whole. In contrast to other states or trading blocs, the EU has committed itself to fighting climate change both internationally and domestically. To this end, it has also embraced innovative tools for participatory governance, such as appointing individuals to act as ambassadors for climate action. This short analysis has summarised the main features of the CPA role and identified how these individuals could have an impact on policy processes in the EU's multilevel system.

The European Commission has developed a relatively clear idea of the roles CPAs should play in climate change governance. The fact that so many individuals have already registered as CPAs indicates that they agree with the Commission's expectations and are up for the task and willing to promote climate action. The Commission should be encouraged to see the CPAs and their reported experiences after serving their term as valuable input for continuously improving the design of both climate policy and climate governance. The CPAs' experiences could also serve as an indicator for assessing the level of ambition that people find acceptable for climate action. The EGD is committed to facilitating a socially just transition. If the level of ambition of climate action is considered too high this could disincentivise people from adopting more climate-friendly behaviour. Consequently, the Commission should consider investing more in mechanisms for bidirectional communication with the CPAs.

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