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Actors in Environmental Discourse: The Discursive Institutionalism Perspective

Abstract:

Objective: Examined for years in various contexts, the environmental issue does not directly focus on the involvement of actors in the process of discourse institutionalisation, which is achievable through the application of discursive institutionalism. The aim of the study is to characterise actors involved in the environmental discourse studied using the discursive institutionalism approach: who participates in discourses, with whom they co-participate, and based on which sources of discourse records their presence is studied.

Research Design & Methods: A systematic review examined 185 DI articles from 2004 to 2022, selecting 33 focused on environmental topics for content analysis.

Findings: Seven actor groups in environmental discourse were identified, with government, experts, and NGOs being the most frequent participants. Government predominated in co-occurrence, and discourse records mainly originated from government documents, legislative materials, and reports.

Implications/Recommendations: Further research is recommended to delve into actor profiles, explore the relationship between discourse source selection and actor appearance, and observe trends in DI research methods. Emphasising inclusive representation in environmental discourse is crucial for policymakers.

Contribution/ Value Added: Participation in environmental discourse is dominated by actors with specialised knowledge or resources, responsible for shaping political agenda goals. This results in low representation of unaffiliated citizens, business, and media.

Article classification: research article

Keywords: environmental discourse, environmental policy, discursive institutionalism, actors, environmental economics

JEL classification: Q5, H8

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Introduction

The placement of specific social needs and problems on the agenda of state action is achieved through their politicisation in political discourse (Kulawik, 2009). The process of the institutionalisation of particular challenges is accompanied by numerous actors who, through interaction, determine the final form – the shape – of public programmes, policies, or social visions. Discourse intensification occurs in those areas of social topics that are connected to values. Environmental policy has become one of the most crucial topics in recent years in public discourse based on values due to observed climate changes and planet degradation (Alam et al., 2016; Fricko et al., 2017). Climate change and planet biodegradation have been addressed globally for years (Hertwich & Peters, 2009; Panagos et al., 2013; Sarkodie & Adams, 2018; K. Zhang & Wen, 2008). The topic of environmental policy is intertwined with various other aspects of human and societal functioning: public health (Watts et al., 2015), trade and consumption (Khan et al., 2020), food (Kopittke et al., 2019; Stehfest et al., 2009), energy (Creutzig et al., 2015), and innovation (Dangelico & Pujari, 2010; Horbach et al., 2012).

It is possible to capture the process of the institutionalisation of the environmental theme on the public agenda through the approach of discursive institutionalism (DI). This approach has been proposed by Vivien Schmidt, who places discourse, the arena for idea-carrying actors – discourse participants – at the research centre (Schmidt, 2016). Discourse allows us to explain the dynamics of institutional change by examining the discursive interaction of ideas and why some discourse actors succeed in bringing their ideas into the public space while others do not (Fairbrass, 2011). Despite its growing popularity, discursive institutionalism is not a fully defined research approach. Examining which actors are considered in discourses about the environment will identify decision-makers influencing the vision of environmental policy throughout society.

Given the above, the aim of the study is to characterise actors involved in the environmental discourse studied using the DI method. The following questions were asked and examined:

- (I) Which types of actors appear most frequently in environmental policy discourse study that use the DI method?
- (II) What are their actual configurations, i.e. with whom do the actor groups most often co-occur?
- (III) What sources were used to characterise the occurrence of actors?

Literature review

Research approach of DI

To describe in the research the process of institutionalising ideas into public policy, the approach of DI, as a fourth type of institutionalism, is used (Carstensen & Schmidt, 2016; Schmidt, 2008, 2016). It is an umbrella concept for the vast range of works in political science that take account of the substantive content of ideas and the interactive processes of discourse that serve to generate those ideas and communicate them to the public (Schmidt, 2010a). Despite the criticism, which pointed out that discourse analysis should be treated more as a research tool than an approach (Bell, 2011; Campbell & Pedersen, 2015), DI is gaining popularity. In the indexed Web of Science (WoS) and Scopus databases of scientific papers, the phrase ‘discursive institutionalism’ in the title, keywords, or abstract results in more than 500 records.

The DI approach assumes placing three aspects at the centre of research interest: ideas, discourse, and discourse participants, allowing us to capture the ongoing process of institutional change

(Schmidt, 2010b). Ideas are the object of analysis and discourse is the arena for their exchange between participants – the carriers of ideas. In the process of discourse, actors utilise ideas to comprehend their surroundings and envision a future perspective (Hauptmeier & Heery, 2014). Discourse, as a distinctive way of comprehending and describing the world (Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002), involves the interaction of various actors with an interest in a specific area. Through this interaction, social issues are transformed into political problems, agendas are set, decisions are made, and actions are taken (Hajer, 2004). Two types of discourse can be distinguished based on the actors involved: (I) coordinative discourse – between policy actors, and (II) communicative discourse – between policy actors and the public (Wahlström & Sundberg, 2018). Discourse is an active process. Meaning in it is derived from what one says, to whom one says it, where, when, and with what authority (Ball, 1993; Schmidt, 2008).

The significance of ‘to whom’ lies in identifying discourse participants – actors. Actors, through the use of ideas, possess the ability to influence the cognitive or normative beliefs of other discourse participants, a phenomenon known as ideational power (Carstensen & Schmidt, 2016). Ideas play a crucial role in shaping the attitudes and actions of these actors (Campbell, 2004). Participants in a discourse can be different individuals or groups, depending on the subject matter: members of government, politicians, activists, media representatives, officials, experts, lobbyists (Schmidt, 2010a). Schmidt has not closed the catalogue. Actors play various roles in discourse, such as: (I) participants demonstrating actions to legitimise them to each other (Schmidt, 2002, p. 169); (II) creators of ideas capable of criticising the existing institutions to bring about changes (Schmidt, 2010b, p. 4); (III) carriers of cognitive and normative ideas whose interactions facilitate institutional changes (Carstensen & Schmidt, 2016, p. 2).

Actors in environmental policy discourse

Apart from being invited to join the discussion, the extent and consistency of involvement are vital. Merely being present in idea exchange does not signify active and thorough participation. Full engagement entails contributing ideas from the topic’s inception to its public manifestation. Participants with fewer individual resources compared to their counterparts (Almeida & Gomes, 2020) and limited access to experts and professional tools of influence (Böhmelt, 2013) have less impact on the evolving solution. Governance actors, due to their access to a network of contacts and a pool of knowledge, typically have stronger opportunities to engage in the debate than civic organisations, for instance. Conversely, the persistence of actors’ involvement in environmental policymaking depends on the substance they present and the ability of other participants to resonate with it (Almeida & Gomes, 2020). Persistence in this context refers to the extent to which the ideas and rationales presented by one group of discourse participants are acknowledged and embraced by other groups.

There is no closed list of actor groups who should participate in the discourse on environmental policy. Majone (1992) highlighted that in specialised discourses, actors possessing knowledge not readily available to their surroundings either join the discussion or are invited to it. Subjects such as the environment are typically entrusted to specialised governmental or supranational agencies. While this approach enhances the effectiveness of the proposed reforms (Trein & Maggetti, 2023), it also hinders the inclusion of diverse actor groups in the dialogue. Consequently, the process of devising solutions becomes somewhat insular and dominated by actors with power and/or knowledge. The inclusiveness of the dialogue has a positive impact on the acceptance

of the results of the policymaking process, even for those participants who held a different opinion from the prevailing ideation path or whose priorities are oriented towards other areas (Ansell & Gash, 2008; Nasiritousi & Grimm, 2022; Ran & Qi, 2019). However, studies analysing the participation of various actor groups in the development and/or implementation of local and central initiatives related to environmental themes reveal the predominant role of the government (Huh, 2014; D. Zhang et al., 2019). They are present in all stages of policymaking. While experts and researchers actively contribute to initiating public discussions and shaping proposed solutions, their role in implementing these solutions remains marginal (Tellmann, 2012). Despite the positive correlation between residents' involvement in co-creating environmental policy and its implementation, residents are not frequently invited to engage in discourse on the environment (Aldunce et al., 2016; Geron et al., 2023). In the studies, there is also noted a noticeable absence of active media involvement (Takahashi & Meisner, 2012). The private sector gains significance in the discourse when capitalist ideas, productivity, and innovation come into play (Liebenguth, 2020). It is also noticeable for its thematic alignment with environmental non-governmental organisations (Anshelm & Hansson, 2011).

Capturing the full dynamics of environmental politics requires the use of contextual analysis, i.e. one that takes into account different sources and records of discourse (Nylén & Jokinen, 2023), although available studies on the role of actors in the environmental topic are based on limited data sources. No studies exist that provide a description of the actors engaged in environmental discourse from the DI perspective.

Research methodology

Adopting the systematic literature review (SLR) approach as guided by the PRISMA protocol (PRISMA-P Group et al., 2015), I conducted an examination of articles published between 2004 and 2022 indexed within the Scopus and Web of Science (WoS) databases. The data source selection process involved four main stages.

Initially, 525 English articles with the term 'discursive institutionalism' in their title, abstract, or keywords were extracted from the Scopus and WoS databases. After removing duplicates (59), analysing abstracts (466), and verifying the use of discursive institutionalism (DI) (172), 33 articles on the environmental issue were identified for analysis. The data collection spans 2004 to 2022, with consistent application of DI to environmental topics since 2010, as shown in Figure 1.

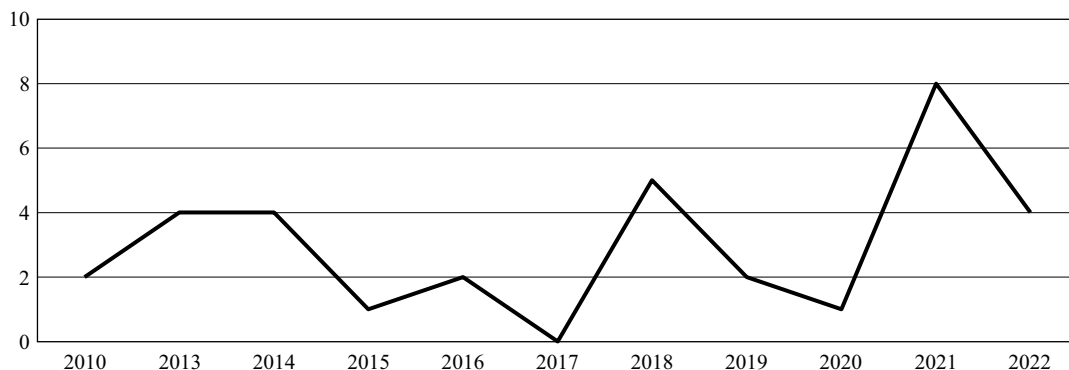


Figure 1. The number of published articles by year of publication

Source: Own research.

No discernible time trend in publications was observed. The highest number of texts on environmental topics using this approach was published in 2021 (8), while four years prior, in 2017, no texts meeting the criteria were found (0).

The discourse was studied primarily in the domestic arena (18), less frequently between countries (9, including 4 within the European Union). The arena of discourse studied also included regions within a country (4) and global organisations (2). Studies of environmental discourse with the DI approach most often referred to European countries and regions (20), less frequently to Asian (4), North America (2), Australasia and Oceania, (2) and North America (1). 2 studies were intercontinental – discourse in Indonesian Peru and Tanzania, and discourse in Vietnam and Mexico.

A comprehensive analysis for the ongoing research problem required a thorough examination of the Discursive Institutionalism (DI) approach employed. Articles were scrutinised concerning research characteristics, actor characteristics, and research data. The coding scheme can be found in the Annex.

In the fourth step of the analysis, thematic groups were identified among the articles based on the DI approach. A detailed overview of these groups is provided in Table 1.

Table 1. Thematic groups of DI papers

	Thematic areas	Number of occurrences
1	Environment and resources management	33
2	Social issues	27
3	Market and economy	26
4	Education	23
5	Policymaking	18
6	International relationships and policy	14
7	Other	12
8	Journalism	12
9	Urban and planning	7

Source: Own research.

Subjects concerning the environment and resource management constitute a predominant research area. An exploration of discourses related to resource management was also encompassed within this thematic area, emphasising that resource management is a relevant element in the context of the environment rather than solely economic efficiency.

Results discussion

Upon analysing the content of the articles, thematic areas were assigned within the broader category of ‘environment.’ The thematic subcategories under the keyword ‘environment’ encompass environmental policy (9), energy (8), water management (5), the formalisation of organisations serving the environment (4), and forestry policy (3). Individual texts covered topics such as consumption, biodiversity, agriculture, and health policy. An overview is presented in Table 2.

Table 2. The thematic area under the keyword ‘environment’

Thematic areas	Number of occurrences
Environmental policy	9
Energy	8
Water management	5
Formalisation of organisations	4
Forestry policy	3
Agriculture	1
Health policy	1
Biodiversity	1
Consumption	1

Source: Own research.

The identified themes were not homogeneous and often pertained to more than one topic. The dominant ones were selected. In one out of three articles (11), the discussion of environmental discourse is accompanied by a segment on the policymaking process.

The statement that environmental issues are the most frequently discussed topic in the discourse proved to be true. However, it is not possible to establish a correlation between the year of publication of the research and the number of publications appearing.

The characteristics of actors

Seven types of actors, participants in the discourse, were identified. They are summarised in Table 3.

Table 3. Types of actors, participants in the discourse

Types of actors	Number of occurrences
Government	29
Experts	21
Ngos and trade unions	18
Politicians	17
Citizens	10
Business	9
Media	6

Source: Own research.

The dominant role of the government group is evident and proved as in other research (Huh, 2014; D. Zhang et al., 2019). It is also observed that the participation of experts, NGOs and trade unions and politicians is frequent (in more than half of the discourses studied). Frequent participation of these four actor groups could be associated with access to individual resources, expert knowledge, and tools of influence (Almeida & Gomes, 2020; Böhmelt, 2013). Representatives of the media potentially have access to such resources as well, but their representation in discourses

is low. The limited participation of media and business representatives in the study should be considered a potential drawback for the dissemination of environmental discourse. Media serve as information carriers and play a significant role in popularising socially-relevant topics in the 21st century. However, in the literature, they are often treated as a platform for discourse rather than its participants (Curran et al., 2022). Conversely, the low participation of business in the discourse may negatively impact the implementation of environmental policies, which are supported by properly functioning business models (Hofmann, 2023). The exclusion of the general public from discussing environmental issues may be driven by the professionalisation of the policy creation process and its reduction to knowledge-based recommendations (Tellmann, 2012), highlighting the dominance of experts, or by the utilisation of different resources and opportunities for influence characteristic of political actors (Kagan & Olofsson, 2023). The relatively strong position of organised civic groups does not necessarily indicate a reduction in the hermetic nature of the environmental discussion, as the analysis failed to distinguish between types of NGOs. Some NGOs have specialised in environmental issues and play more of an expert role rather than representing citizens. Despite the widespread impact of environmental topics on the community, the participation of unaffiliated citizens in the discourse was low, which is observed in other studies (Aldunce et al., 2016)

The configurations of actors

The co-occurrence of actors within the ongoing discourse for the overall subjects is illustrated in Table 4.

Table 4. The co-occurrence of actors

	Government	Experts	NGOs and trade unions	Politicians	Citizens	Media	Business
Government	X	19	17	17	10	5	9
Experts	19	X	14	12	6	5	7
Ngos and trade unions	17	14	X	9	7	4	6
Politicians	17	12	9	X	6	3	5
Citizens	9	6	7	5	X	5	3
Business	9	7	6	5	4	3	X
Media	5	5	4	3	5	x	3

Source: Own research.

Each of the aforementioned groups of actors in the discourse most frequently interacts with the government. When governments are excluded from the analysis, experts assume the dominant role for all actors. An exception is observed with citizens, who appear more frequently in discourse with NGOs and trade unions than with experts. The less frequent actors in the discourse – business, media, and citizens – do not engage with each other more often but, rather, accompany the discourse of government, experts, NGOs, and politicians. These results may also suggest that mainly coordinative discourse and not communicative discourse is being studied. The high representation of government and experts confirms Majone's (1992) observation about the concentration of specialised topics within the government and expert groups, irrespective

of the discourse arena (Sääksjärvi, 2020). The discourse, more often serving in the phase of setting goals for political agendas or social programmes than in their implementation stage, is primarily represented by policy creators (Buijs et al., 2022). The main role in setting the political agenda is played by the governing authorities. Opponents seek support either within the governing group or challenge their position (Louwerse & Otjes, 2018). It is noteworthy in this context that politicians did not appear independently in the discourse; they always co-occurred with another group of actors, most often with the government.

In the analysed articles, the co-occurrence of actors within the discourses is illustrated in Table 5.

Table 5. The co-occurrence of actors in one discourse study

Number of types of actors occurrence in one discourse	Amount of discourses
7	2
6	1
5	5
4	5
3	10
2	6
1	4

Source: Own research.

Within the analysed texts, there were only two discourses when all groups of actors co-occurred. Considering the call for scientists to account for the complexity of the socio-ecological system in research (Ostrom, 2007), the low involvement of many actors groups in a single study on environmental discourse is surprising. Three groups were most frequently mentioned (10). In four researches, the discourse was examined within a single group. No statistically significant relationship was observed between the occurrences of actors in the studied discourse and its thematic area. The samples for each thematic area were too small to draw conclusive remarks from. However, an observation was noted for thematic groups with similar frequencies: environmental policy (9) and energy (8). In environmental policy discourses, there were more instances of three or more actors being present than in the energy discourse.

Sources used for discourse analysis

The types of secondary sources used in studies analysing environmental discourse are shown in Table 6.

For all participants in the discourse, the most frequently utilised sources were official statements, documents, and legal acts, including regulators. This pattern persists even in the case of experts, whose primary space for discussion is typically scientific publications and expert reports. The recording of discourse on social media was practically non-existent (isolated cases). The relatively equal contribution of the four dominant actors in environmental discourse is evident in transcriptions of public debates, with the remaining sources being predominantly from the government.

The selection of sources – discourse records – is characteristic of the aforementioned discourse-dominant groups. In the face of Schmidt’s non-systematisation of the DI approach, determining

the direction of this relationship is challenging: whether researchers first recognised the sources of the discourse record and identified the involved actors from these or whether the actors were identified first, and then the records of their statements were found. The limitation of the discourse record sources may also suggest that other actors participate in the discourses but are not included in the study using the DI approach

Table 6. Types of secondary sources used to analyse discourse

	Articles in newspapers	Videos and digital records	Audio records	Law and legal acts, regulations	Social media	Promotional materials	Official statements and documents	Transcript of public debates	Research or experts papers
Government	8	0	0	21	1	1	22	7	11
Experts	5	0	0	16	1	1	16	6	10
Ngos and trade unions	7	0	0	15	1	1	13	5	7
Politicians	4	0	0	15	0	1	15	6	8
Citizens	3	0	0	8	0	0	7	2	4
Business	1	0	0	7	0	1	6	3	4
Media	3	0	0	4	0	0	3	2	3

Source: Own research.

The primary data sources were interviews, with an average of 25 discourse participants interviewed. Representations of the different groups of discourse participants are presented in Table 7.

Table 7. Interviews with groups of actors

Government	Experts	Ngos and trade unions	Politicians	Citizens	Media	Business
24	18	15	14	8	4	8

Source: Own research.

The depicted representation aligns with the distribution of participant groups in the overall study, with government officials dominating (24). The interviews encompassed the entire business group (18) both in the interviews and, overall, in the discourse study. More instances of business, media, or citizen involvement were observed in studies where they were interviewed. This may reflect the more comprehensive approach of researchers who chose to invite a broader range of actors, indicating their research inquisitiveness. Using various discourse sources aligns with the research presented by Nylén & Jokinen (2023).

Conclusions

The objective of the study was to characterise actors in the discourse on environmental issues using the DI approach. Based on the analysis of the selected papers, groups of actors were identified:

government, experts, NGOs and trade unions, politicians, citizens, businesses. Representatives from governments, experts, and official civic organisations (NGOs, trade unions) dominate the study. Government representation prevails across all subjects examined in the discourse. Experts and NGOs typically secure the second and third positions. The configuration of co-occurrence in discourse is also predominantly led by government, and its arrangement depends on the object of study.

The chosen number of groups for research using the DI approach is apparent, as more than half of the studies incorporate three or fewer actor groups. The reliance on official documents and legal acts as primary discourse sources underscores the formal nature of the studied discourse. The selection of data sources may inherently narrow down participants in the discourse.

Policymakers should pay attention to the highlighted lack of representation in the study of citizen, media, and business discourse, whether this absence is reflective of their limited presence in the environmental discourse in general or is only in research about environmental discourse by using DI approach. Policymakers should consider initiatives to address these potential representation gaps for a more inclusive environmental policymaking process and equating coordinative discourse with communicative one. The research is part of a growing trend of interest in the DI approach. Observing research trends over time, particularly the division into specific thematic groups within the environmental field, can contribute to the establishment of consistent research methods using the DI approach.

The study has certain limitations. Firstly, the chosen number of groups for research using the DI approach is constrained, with over half of the studies incorporating three or fewer actor groups. Additionally, the heavy reliance on official documents and legal acts as primary discourse sources highlights the formal nature of the investigated discourse. Furthermore, the selection of data sources may inherently limit the range of participants in the discourse. The concentration of research on environmental discourse using DI in Europe is also a limitation. The uneven representation of discourse research between continents can be further analysed for its cause.

To fully describe the influence of interest groups on the institutionalisation of solutions, it is crucial to capture the multifaceted aspects that accompany these groups (Bey, 2022; Halpin & Jordan, 2012). Consequently, research is recommended to delve deeper into the presented analysis, particularly in presenting the complete profile of actors. Identifying the relationship between discourse source selection and the appearance of actors, as well as the direction of this relationship, would be advisable. The co-occurrence of discourse actors, from the perspective of coalition formation, could be the subject of further research using Discourse Network Analysis based on Leifeld's (2018) research. Observing research trends, including the division into specific thematic groups within the environmental field, will contribute to establishing consistent research methods in the DI approach. For policymakers, the research results should highlight the lack of adequate representation in the study of citizen, media, and business discourse. Whether this is a result of their absence in the discourse or in the study of environmental discourse remains an open question.

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Annex. Coding scheme

Research plan	
Research type	1–explanative
	2–explorative
	3–predictive
	4–descriptive
Fields	1–environment
	2–social issues
	3–market and economy
	4–education
	5–international relations
	6–journalism
	7–policy making
	8–urban planning
	9–other
Research object	1–policy
	2–programme
	3–philosophy
Period of analysis	0–not given, difficult to define, lack of division between historical background and actual object of analysis
	1–one year
	2–two-three years
	3–four and more
DI as methodological framework	
Presence of ID definitions	1–yes
	0–no
Role of ID in the research plan	1–main, principal
	0–one of many
Accompanying institutionalisms	0–lack
	1–historical
	2–rational choice
	3–sociological
Discourse actors	1–politicians
	2–government
	3–businessmen
	4–NGOs, workers unions
	5–citizens
	6–journalists
	7–experts (scholars)

Data sources and analysis	
Data source	1–directly mentioned
	2–indirectly mentioned
	0–not specified
Data selection	1–described in detail
	2–described generally
	0–not specified
Explanation of data collection	1–described in detail
	2–described generally
	0–not specified
Type of data sources	1–primary
	2–secondary
Primary data sources	1–interviews
	2–surveys
Secondary data sources	1–articles in newspapers
	2–videos and digital records
	3–audio records
	4–legal acts, regulations
	5–social media
	6–marketing materials
	7–official statements and documents
	8–transcripts of public debates
	9–research or experts papers
Analysis process	1–described in detail
	2–described generally
	0–not specified

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Research Ethics Committee

Not applicable.

Conflicts of Interest

The author/authors declare no conflict of interest.

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Data Availability Statement

All data will be available and shared upon request.
