

# Stakeholder dynamics in environmental policy making in Kazakhstan

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## Abstract

*This study explores stakeholder dynamics between government administrators and members of coalitions as it affects policy learning among government administrators in Kazakhstan, particularly in the case of the implementation of the Concept of Transition of Kazakhstan to a “Green Economy” (the Concept) since 2013. The article examines how stakeholder dynamics influence policy learning among government administrators based on one of the Advocacy Coalition Framework (ACF) tenets, that of policy learning in a nascent policy subsystem. Based on field research conducted between May 2020 and September 2021, I have found that stakeholders in coalitions hold different views on implementing the Concept. Although government administrators are stakeholders in a coalition that emerged in a nascent policy subsystem, their learning is mostly defined as formal, as a result of stakeholder dynamics between the coalitions.*

**Keywords:** environmental policy, policy learning, nascent subsystem, stakeholder dynamics

## Introduction

Kazakhstan is the first country in the Central Asian region that announced the transition to a Green Economy. It was announced by the Leader of the Nation, President Nazarbayev, in 2013, even though the economy was and is still strongly dependent on hydrocarbon and fossil fuel extraction: nearly 70% of electricity and 99% of heat in 2017 was produced by burning coal (Tokayev, K-J., 2021, p. 10). Although some interviewees see the announcement of the Concept in 2013 as an ambitious initiative of President Nazarbayev in the lead up to the organisation of the EXPO 2017 exhibitions in Astana, others view the release of the Concept as a timely and urgent policy decision towards the rational use of natural resources. According to the Concept, a green economy is an “economy with a high level of life quality for its population, and a careful and meaningful use of natural resources in the best interests of the current and future generations” (Concept of “green economy”, 2013). However, the results of industry performance, between January and December 2021, show that the increase in the volume of production is built on an increase in the extraction of mineral resources by the mining industry by 101.7%, while production in the manufacturing industry increased by 5.5 percent (Agency for Strategic Planning and Reforms of the Republic of Kazakhstan, Bureau of National Statistics, 2021). Although there is no direct correlation between the primary emission of pollutants from industrial enterprises and oil production, there are studies on growing trends of air pollution and its health impact in workplaces, as well as the levels of exposure to particulate matter during the cold season (Kerimray et al., 2020; Vinnikov et al., 2020; Vinnikov et al., 2021).

While the Concept represents a commitment to strengthening environmental protection by following the national and international environmental obligations, it is also associated with the implementation of the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (The SDGs in action, 2022). However, nine years of implementation of the Concept have revealed weaknesses and deficiencies as evidenced by the growing disputes among stakeholders. The examination of policy learning among government administrators, as the stakeholders in coalitions, illustrates the issue of the extent processes of stakeholder dynamics might influence policy change in a nascent policy subsystem such as Kazakhstan.

By examining advocacy coalitions and the influence of stakeholder dynamics between government administrators and other stakeholders who create and coordinate environmental policy, this analysis will answer the following question: How do stakeholder dynamics affect environmental policy learning among government administrators in Kazakhstan?

## Literature review

The ACF was developed by Paul Sabatier and Hank Jenkins-Smith in the 1980s (Sabatier, 1988; Sabatier & Jenkins-Smith, 1993). This framework explains policy change as a result of changes in belief systems among advocacy coalitions. Three scopes of beliefs, deep core beliefs, policy core beliefs, and secondary beliefs, indicate values and techniques of policy realisation (Sabatier, 1988, p. 131). The ACF's application focuses on a particular policy subsystem involving a variety of actors from different areas who are competing to realise their policies based on their beliefs to change a policy within the timeframe of a decade or more (Sabatier, 1988, p. 131; Sabatier & Jenkins-Smith, 1993, p. 17). While the ACF focuses on changes in beliefs of members of coalitions, policy learning is one of the indicators of the ACF that provides sufficient reasons explaining policy change and belief change (Jenkins-Smith et al., 2018, p. 151).

Studies by Dunlop et al. (2018) and May (1992) focus on learning as the “updating of knowledge and beliefs about policy” as a result of interaction, experience, or provision of new knowledge as well as “alterations in behaviour” (Dunlop et al., p.3; May, p.332). Policy learning in the ACF takes practical approach “in understanding changes in at least the secondary aspects [secondary beliefs] of governmental action programs” that can lead to a modification of policy core beliefs (Sabatier, 1988, p. 149).

The internationalisation of the ACF and its practices of application are now widely acknowledged and continue to be studied in different countries<sup>1</sup> after firstly being examined in North America and Western Europe as a new mechanism to understand policy processes (Weible et al., 2020, p. 1055; Weible et al., 2011, p. 356; Koivisto, 2014, p. 42). While the ACF experiences revisions and new application practices, it also demonstrates its continual development and conceptualisation (Sabatier & Weible, 2007, p. 190; Weible et al., 2011, p. 356; Weible et al., 2020, p. 1060). Jenkins-Smith, Nohrstedt, Weible, and Ingold mention that new studies on nascent subsystems will allow scholars to examine the nature of initial conditions in nascent policy subsystems

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<sup>1</sup> (Beverwijk et al., 2008; Chan & Chou, 2020; Ingold, 2011; Jang, S. et al., 2016; Nwalie, 2019; Scott, 2012; Jenkins-Smith et al., 2018; Wong, 2015; Yun, 2019;)

versus conditions in mature policy subsystems which will provide new conceptualisations of the ACF's application (Jenkins-Smith et al., 2018, p. 157).

According to Paul Sabatier and Christopher Weible “secondary beliefs are narrower in scope than policy core beliefs, [thus] changing them requires less evidence and fewer agreements among subsystem actors and thus should be less difficult” (Sabatier & Weible, 2007, p. 196). Jenkins-Smith, Nohrstedt, Weible, and Ingold outline four categories that explain factors of learning in the ACF (Jenkins-Smith et al., 2018, p. 152). A degree of openness in participating, a level of conflict that indicates a level of learning between coalitions, a level of intractability of an issue, as well as the characteristics of coalitions are indicators of learning (Jenkins-Smith et al., 2018, p. 152). To analyse what kind of learning factors are prevalent in this particular study, the emphasis has been primarily on a nascent policy subsystem, that “[is] characterized by ambivalence and unclear political positions” (Jenkins-Smith et al., 2018, p. 141).

The concept of a nascent subsystem is applicable in a wide variety of contexts. According to Stritch, for instance, a nascent system is characterised as an issue recently emerged on the political agenda, whose time horizon includes less than 10 years of development (Stritch, 2015, p. 440). The case examined by Stritch, which revolved around union transparency, illustrates a newly emerged policy in Canadian national politics in 2011 (Stritch, 2015, p. 438). Similarly, the Beverwijk et al. example in Mozambique defines nascent systems as “very young (sub)systems in volatile contexts” by linking the uniformity of nascent systems with the context where this subsystem occurs (2008, p. 376). According to their analysis of the higher education policy in Mozambique, a subsystem, that is “shaped by new issues and new conceptualizations” is defined as a nascent subsystem (Beverwijk et al., 2008, p. 372). Although the nascent subsystem in Canada and the nascent subsystem in Mozambique are cases that differ based on the countries’ political and economic development, both cases introduce newly emerged policies in nascent policy subsystems with their analysis of policy processes.

To examine how stakeholder dynamics affect policy learning among government administrators, the analysis of the implementation of the Concept, beginning in 2013, is applied to the case in a nascent subsystem. Even though the Concept has been in an implementation phase for nine years, the new policy of transition to a green economy includes coalitions with new stakeholders and new dynamics in relationships between stakeholders. The variety of different stakeholders in the implementation of the Concept, including governmental administrators from key ministries, regional administrations, non-governmental stakeholders, scholars, activists, and experts, and their relationship dynamics demonstrate weaknesses in government administrators’ secondary belief systems rather than evidence of the policy strength.

## **Overview of environmental policy making in Kazakhstan 1991–2013**

Kazakhstan is a unitary state with a presidential system of government, which gained its independence in 1991. Kazakhstan, with more than 5000 deposits of mineral resources, is “among the top ten largest countries of the world, in ninth place” (The Republic of Kazakhstan, 2021; The National atlas of the Republic of Kazakhstan, 2010, p. 134). Environmental policy in independent Kazakhstan is built on Soviet legacy and its consequences for the Kazakh land, and the new government’ policies in this area.

Although the revision and approval of legislative documents in all sectors was based on the needs and requirements of the newly established country, the first consolidated law, the Environmental Code of the Republic of Kazakhstan, was only passed in 2007. Although there were some efforts and steps to add ecological security as a part of public security into the on legal act entitled The Concept of Public and Ecological Security in 1996, the content did not deal with the country's policy toward environmental issues specifically (The Concept of Public and Ecological Security, 1996). Moreover, the 2003 revised version of The Concept of Environmental Security for 2004-2015, was an additional effort to demonstrate the government's attitude towards the creation of a strategically environmental view and its policymaking, though this legal instrument was cancelled by the decree of the President in 2011 (The Concept of environmental security from 2004–15).

In the early stages of the country's independence, the announcement of concepts was one of the landmarks related to the government's management style. Compared with laws and codes, a concept, as an official document, is seen as a description of a strategic development based on current views, guidance, or course of action on specific topics. While a concept is not a normative and legal act, as an official document, it includes goals, tasks, and approaches for realising these measures of a particular policy. The frequency of a concept's adoption, review, and cancelation– illustrated in the table below– also demonstrates that a concept, as a formal document, is nondurable and less realised in Kazakhstan (Table 1).

**Table 1: The frequency of announcements of official documents (concepts) related to environmental policy from the beginning of independence in 1996–2021**

N	Title of concept	Duration	Date of termination	Reasons for termination
1	The Concept of rational use and protection of land resources of the Republic of Kazakhstan for 1994–95 and for the period until 2010	1994–2010	2005	Cancelled on government order
2	The Concept of public and ecological security of the Republic of Kazakhstan	1996	2011	Cancelled by decree of the President
3	The Concept for the development and placement of specially protected natural areas of the Republic of Kazakhstan up to 2030	2000	2010	Expired on government order
4	The Concept of water sector development and water policy of the Republic of Kazakhstan up to 2010	2002–10	in action	
5	The Concept of ecological security of the Republic of Kazakhstan	2004–15	2011	Cancelled by decree of the President
6	The Concept of fisheries development of the Republic of Kazakhstan	2007–15	2010	Cancelled on government order
7	The Concept of the transition of the Republic of Kazakhstan to sustainable development for 2007–24	2007–24	2011	Cancelled by decree of the President
8	The Concept of the Transition of Republic of Kazakhstan to a “green economy” ( <i>the Concept</i> )	2013	in action	

Source: The Legal information system of regulatory legal acts of Kazakhstan

The process of concept' implementation and initiation illustrates not only the inconsistency of environmental policy in general but also the shifts from one strategy to a different one. This table further illustrates an additional characteristic of the government's environmental policy-making: The process is vague. While the termination of a concept never contains specific evidence and/or arguments for the concepts' termination, each new version of a concept outlines in an introduction section a new vision and a re-formation of the national economy with new milestones for achieving the goals set out in the concepts. These data are taken from the Legal information system of regulatory legal acts of the Republic of Kazakhstan, Adilet (The Legal information system of regulatory legal acts of Kazakhstan, 2021). Table 1 demonstrates how the government approached environmental policy between 1991 to 2013, that is until the release of the Concept in 2013. Although Table 1 shows various approaches taken with regards to environmental policy-making in the early days of the country's independence, the Concept's aim to transit to a green economy is portrayed as a newly emerged policy.

## Research Method

The key research question is: How do stakeholder dynamics affect environmental policy learning among government administrators in Kazakhstan? To examine stakeholder dynamics that affect environmental policy learning among government administrators through the Concept's implementation, the goal was to interview the main stakeholders involved in different aspects of the Concept's realisation. To do this, I conducted 43 semi-structured online interviews from May 2020 to September 2021 and used the NVivo program to analyse the data. The target population consisted of 43 participants: 20 representatives from the Ministry of Ecology, Geology, and Natural resources (Ministry of Ecology), the Ministry of Energy, the Ministry of Agriculture, the Ministry of the National Economy, local governments, 13 NGOs, six independent experts, and four scholars and activists. The list of participants was created based on my previous network in the civil service and snowball sampling that allowed me to conduct interviews with the following relevant stakeholders. The primary criterion was the participants' professional relationship with the implementation of the Concept, including stakeholders who have been active in contributing to the Concept.

While stakeholder dynamics is characterised as a process of different actions and interrelation between two coalitions, exploring a possible connection between stakeholder dynamics and learning is one of the critical insights of my findings. I used open-ended questions that included what or how questions to examine "the central phenomenon," which helped me gather in-depth answers to the central question concerning my research (Creswell & Clark, 2011, p. 160). By using the following questions, I more specifically examined how policy learning might occur among administrators.

1. What do you think explains the main difficulties and concerns of implementation of the Concept generally? Why do you think so?
2. What do you think explains the main difficulties and concerns of implementation of the Concept specifically related to your professional activity? Why do you think so?
3. What specific types of information has to be exchanged between two coalitions?

By applying the next set of questions, I examined how stakeholder dynamics influence policy learning among government administrators. Some of the questions provide insights into developments or any shifts in the relationships between government administrators and other stakeholders. These questions explore how stakeholder dynamics might influence learning among administrators. The frequency and consistency of various meetings among governmental and non-governmental stakeholders and their potential outcomes were used for stakeholder dynamics evaluation. Also, these questions provide insights not only about the number of meetings but also about results of these meetings, ways of interaction between stakeholders, and rationale of failures or successes of policy provision.

4. Could you please describe primary relationships that were, or are, the most successful and least successful? Can you give an example?
5. Could you please describe any difficulties in relationships between you and non-government stakeholders? Can you give an example?
6. Could you please specify how often you interact with the main stakeholders from different non-government organisations?

The coding process is characterised by its uniqueness because every participant is an expert in their professional field as well as an expert in Kazakhstan's "green economy" policy.<sup>2</sup> Using my network to reach every participant who is an expert provided my research with valuable findings. Belonging to community of experts positively impacts my data collection that is based on specific and nuanced informed coding. This means that all coding categories are grounded in expert knowledge bases.

Due to the relatively small size of the subsystem, I was able to speak to all relevant stakeholders. Moreover, these codings help to highlight commonalities between participants' answers and how they interpreted the questions about the key actors of the Concept's implementation by analysing stakeholder dynamics occurring in this implementation process, questions that indicate how an independent variable like 'stakeholder dynamics' influences the dependent variable 'policy learning', specifically, how long participants have been involved in projects related to the Concept. In the following section, there are findings related to the potential of stakeholder dynamics as they affect environmental policy learning among government administrators.

## Findings

According to stakeholder dynamics between governmental administrators and key stakeholders in the implementation of the Concept, two groups are defined as coalitions involved in the implementation processes (Figure 1). The first is a group of stakeholders predominantly consisting of governmental administrators from key ministries, local and regional governments (akimats), associations, and centers. The next coalition of stakeholders includes independent experts, NGOs, activists, and scholars. Two coalitions illustrate a current image of most operating stakeholders using their expertise, knowledge, and skills to achieve the Concept's goals. Based on data, the most often used mechanism of communication that influences stakeholder

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<sup>2</sup>“Expert” is defined here as a person who is working in an official position and his/her affiliation is linked to an organisation that involved in environmental policy

dynamics of relationships between coalitions are official meetings, roundtable discussions, working meetings, and social media.

### **The key arguments of the Concept's implementation issue articulated by stakeholders as a result of dynamics in the relationship between the coalitions**

Based on findings, the following arguments are related to the main difficulties in the implementation of the Concept as articulated by stakeholders.

First, governmental administrators indicate that fluctuations in positions, as new appointees, among high-ranking governmental administrators, followed by implementing new policies and strategic tasks, often cancel the realisation of previously adopted plans and programs. The same argument, mentioned by non-governmental stakeholders, is related to failures in implementing already confirmed policies with the previous administration and reluctance to implement these policies by a new administration. "There is a lack of institutional memory in governmental organizations that interferes with consistency in collaboration between the government and NGOs" (R29).

Second, the government administrators underline a latent preference in Kazakh society to rely on fossil fuel development and the mining industry. This reliance is based not only on experts' positionality by arguing why the implementation of the Concept is so controversial but also on people who used to pay for cheap coal annually because of low wages and social inequality. "There is a reliance on fossil fuel development, and still powerful arguments highlighted by government officials and their policies provided by ministries as well as factors that demonstrate a continual use of coal as one of the cheapest fuels among people" (R22).

Third, the non-governmental stakeholders mention a low level of expertise among governmental administrators that cause ineffective communication between stakeholders and mutual understanding of main concerns. "Strong experts and professionals usually do not remain in the office for a long time because of low wages, poor social benefits, and lack of a meritocracy" (R14).

Forth, the lack of infrastructure or poor infrastructure mostly in regions is highlighted by non-governmental and governmental stakeholders. "Although people in some places do not have access to clean water or endure difficulties with waste management around their regions that directly influence air pollution, they still do not acknowledge the consequences of environmental issues. Problems with poverty, economic instability, and survival in these circumstances are essential arguments of people's lack of awareness" (R19).

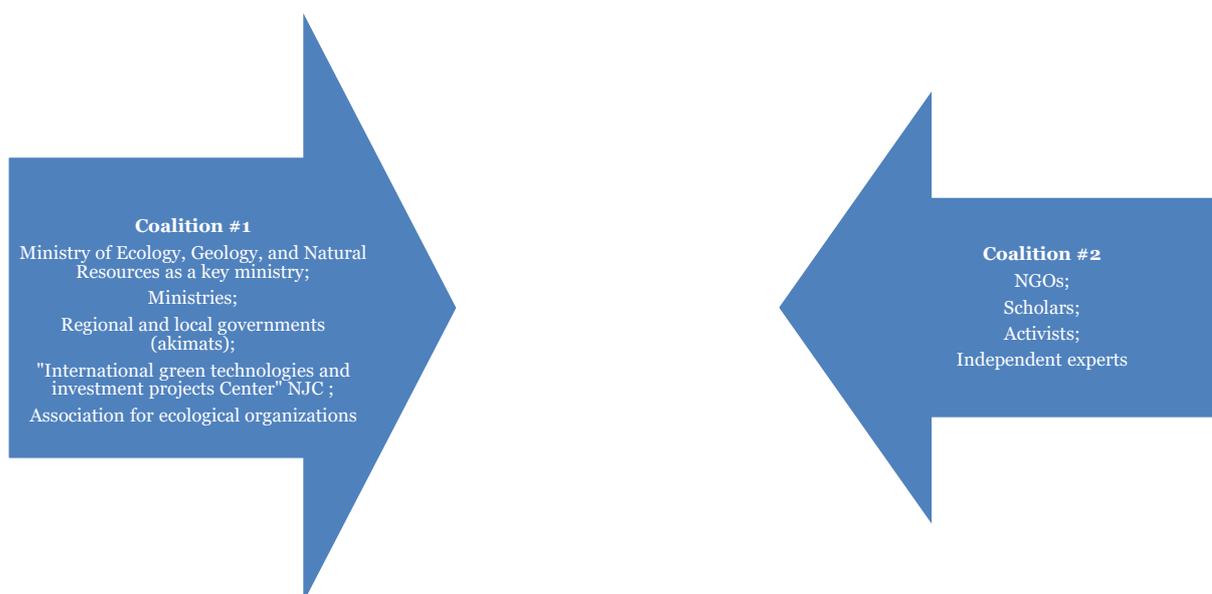
The following deficiencies, such as a lack of interest, understanding, awareness in society and a lack of experts and professionals among governmental administrators, are often mentioned by interviewees from these two groups as systemic issues. Although a lack of interest and understanding highlighted by governmental administrators is mainly attributed to people's ignorance and a lack of responsibility generally, the same arguments stressed by non-governmental stakeholders relate to people's fundamental issues of quality of life rather than issues to transition to a "green economy." Moreover, the deficiencies mentioned above illustrate key shortcomings of the current implementation processes that stakeholders of coalitions discuss.

## The key insights of stakeholder dynamics in the relationship between coalitions which might influence policy learning among government administrators

According to policy beliefs of government administrators versus policy beliefs of non-government organisations, a degree of openness in participation among stakeholders in coalitions and a level of conflict between them illustrate the level and quality of stakeholder dynamics.

While non-governmental stakeholders are more active in their policy provision, committed to and interested in building open debates and discussions with the government to establish and find a standard solution on environmental issues, government administrators still keep an official form of interaction. According to participants from non-governmental stakeholders, "while government administrators pursue an official and formal style of communication to demonstrate their involvement with different stakeholders, low awareness from the government administrators, and a limited number of experts, are one of ineffective means of government's policy provision" (R39). However, one of the participants from the non-governmental sector underlined, "The use of social media, such as the YouTube channel, Facebook, and the WhatsApp chats provide a fast and effective interaction between us, activists, to raise our awareness regarding environmental issues and protest against ignorance from government" (R41). This is the current trend of using social media by activists, that is acknowledged by governmental administrators as well, who mentioned that one of the key responsibilities, particularly, by local administrators is to respond in a timely manner to any criticism of government actions, "All administrators have their accounts on social media platforms, so, we have to respond immediately to any criticism or illegal actions and provide explanations and feedback regarding our actions" (R37).

**Figure 1: Stakeholders of the Concept's implementation**



According to the responses of governmental administrators, "we are open to admit and discuss any information related to the topic of issue. Roundtable discussions, conferences, and public meetings are platforms that administrators frequently use to get any feedback from stakeholders" (R2; R7). However, based on interviews with non-

governmental stakeholders, these kinds of communications are usually described as formal, official, and lacking any productive developments and effective communication, thus superficial.

Moreover, all participants agree that environmental problems are getting worse, particularly representatives from NGOs, activists, and scholars mention that "air pollution is a critical issue in big cities like Nur-Sultan, Almaty, Ust-Kamenogorsk, Shymkent, Karaganda among other environmental topics, and immediate steps are required from the government to solve them" (R37). "Although the Concept is a strategic document, there are many problems like waste management, limited access to clean water in the Akmola region, as an example, that the government have to solve without using the unrecognisable phrase such as a 'green economy transition' that most of the people do not understand and care about" (R21).

At the same time, as government administrators highlight, "the announcement of the Concept was a right and on-time decision from our previous President, Nazarbayev. There is no time to wait and see how our Kazakhstani ecology is suffering" (R10). The representative from the Ministry of Ecology states "the government is acting in a constructive way to solve problems related to air pollution, access to clean water, issues with waste management, and the Concept is a roadmap to address essential principles to transition to a "green economy" (R9).

Although the government stresses the articulation of essential in the creation of environmental policy, such as the transition to a green economy, policy learning, as a result of stakeholder dynamics in a newly emerged policy, is indicated as formal. While there are examples of stakeholder dynamics in the relationship among coalitions, such as participation in meetings, discussions at roundtables, and conferences, the level of conflict among coalitions is not strong enough to change the level of inflexibility among government administrators as regards the inclusion of new policies on the agenda.

The majority of governmental administrators mention positive examples of interaction between them and non-governmental stakeholders, as well as successful projects and a positive trend of interrelation. "We use roundtables, conferences, social media, and different meetings where we invite various representatives from NGOs and activists. When we organise, for instance, public gatherings to collect trash and clean up our area, we welcome all people to be a part of these meetings and be together to protect our environment" (R20). Conversely, however, non-governmental stakeholders argue that successful projects depend on who is initiating the project, why the project is/was initiated, and who the key managers of this project are. The most successful projects result from national and international events occurring in the capital city, Nur-Sultan, such as EXPO-2017 or international exhibitions. "While in some cases, these meetings have a formal style of interrelation, just to demonstrate publicly how high-ranking administrators are involved in the protection of the environment, they do not act later with the same passion and consistency" (R29). Participants from non-governmental sector mention, "Although these common projects sometimes illustrate an official form of interaction, that later can be described as a passive form of interaction, governmental administrators are getting used to this trend to collaborate with non-governmental stakeholders who are becoming more active in social media, though not dominant" (R22; R25).

According to the findings from interviews, there are– if not direct– still patterns of positive trends between stakeholder dynamics among stakeholders in coalitions and learning processes among government administrators. While there are no definite outcomes after participation in meetings between government administrators and non-governmental stakeholders, such as activists, scholars, and representatives from NGOs, the social media platforms are an effective instrument for non-governmental participants to raise their awareness, frustration, and criticism.

## **Conclusion**

The analysis of the implementation processes of the Concept that started in 2013 remains an interesting domain that illustrates a case of a policy process examination in a nascent policy subsystem. The environmental policy in Kazakhstan, which went through various complex iterations based on conflicting strategies and uncertainties in official statements, is a good example of a newly emerged policy, that scholars in the ACF define as less examined and underdeveloped. By answering the key question about how stakeholder dynamics affect environmental policy learning among government administrators in Kazakhstan, the different perspectives of government administrators and non-governmental stakeholders were examined. Based on an analysis of stakeholders, two large groups of stakeholders are characterised as coalitions based on their beliefs and missions. These two coalitions have their respective approaches regarding how to achieve the Concept's goals and effectively deal with the growing incidence of environmental issues in Kazakhstan. The first coalition consists of government organisations in charge of the Concept's implementation based on their key organisational values and mission, the second coalition includes non-governmental stakeholders who often criticise the implementation processes and governmental administrators' continuous formality of interrelation. Openness in participation between stakeholders in coalitions, effective meetings, and productive conversations at conferences that are followed up by practical actions to provide more effective implementation of the Concept are values and beliefs that prevail among non-governmental stakeholders.

Although in most cases, stakeholder dynamics between two coalitions are defined as more formal than effective, this inference is based on interviews where non-governmental stakeholders stressed the dependence and the lack of policy consistency among governmental administrators responsible for policy provision. This attitude is characterised by fluctuations among high–ranking governmental administrators, and application of controversial and short-term policy tools used by governmental administrators, and the difficulties related to inconsistency in policies, illustrating the lack of institutional memory by governmental administrators.

While stakeholders of both coalitions agree that interaction at various meetings and conferences is essential for the effective implementation of the Concept, they also admit that this interaction is improving and becoming more effective through the use of the social media platforms as a tool to address the most preferred ways of policy implementation. Finally, because this study examined the Concept's implementation as one single policy document, the outcomes of nine years of its implementation will be interesting to examine as one of the milestones of environmental policy in Kazakhstan that is still characterised as a nascent policy subsystem in a general policy agenda.

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