Rights, equity and justice: A diagnostic for social meta-norm diffusion in environmental governance

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ABSTRACT

Social meta-norms, including human rights, gender equality, equity and environmental justice, are mainstream principles of good environmental governance. The permeation of social meta-norms through global environmental goals, policies and agreements (e.g., the Sustainable Development Goals) is now generally accepted to be critical to the integrity of the Earth's system and to social dignity and opportunities for humanity. Yet, little is known about how globally articulated social meta-norms lead to shifts in action at other scales of governance. Specifically, analysis of the discursive and dynamic nature of social meta-norm diffusion is lacking. To build a better understanding of what shapes the diffusion of social meta-norms across different scales of environmental governance, we provide a synthesis that bridges political and sociological theory and underscores the critical role of agency in the diffusion process. We identify eight drivers of diffusion along a spectrum that ranges from prescriptive drivers, which leave little space for norm negotiation, to discursive drivers, which provide an enabling space for norm interpretation. We hypothesize these drivers intersect with a parallel spectrum of actor responses, ranging from complete resistance to social meta-norms at one end, to complete internalization of social meta-norms at the other. Our diagnostic of integrated drivers and responses is aimed at advancing conventional norm diffusion theory by providing a better account of discursive forces in this process. Applying these diagnostic elements to future empirical research has the potential to improve the rationale, speed, mode and impact of social meta-norm diffusion in multiscale environmental governance.

1. Introduction

There is growing recognition that to achieve environmental outcomes, attention to the social dimensions of environmental sustainability is critical (Bennett et al., 2017; Biermann et al., 2012). The way in which environmental and social spaces are navigated, and outcomes are achieved, is shaped by governance. Environmental governance incorporates the formal and informal architecture (i.e., rules, rule-making systems, institutions and processes) and agents (i.e., actors and networks) at all levels of decision-making, from global-to-local, relating to natural resources use and management (Biermann et al., 2009a). Environmental and social meta-norms form part of the environmental governance architecture as principles that set the standards of expected behaviour considered essential for environments and societies to flourish (Biermann et al., 2009b; Kooiman and Jentoft, 2009). The integration of both environmental and social meta-norms within global environmental commitments and practice is considered crucial to widespread achievement of strategic sustainable development agendas that support human dignity, opportunities and the integrity of the Earth's system (Berkes and Folke, 1998; Biermann et al., 2012; Raworth, 2017).

Conventional examples of environmental meta-norms include protection of biodiversity and preservation of ecosystems (Haas, 1999; Matulis and Moyer, 2017; Saunier and Meganck, 2007). These norms manifest in global commitments such as the *Convention on Biological Diversity* (1992), the *World Heritage Convention* (1972) and the *Ramsar Convention* (1975). Within these commitments, humans are alternately framed as beneficiaries (or

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destroyers) of ecosystem goods and services, or as an intrinsic part of social-ecological systems (Berkes and Folke, 1998; Mace, 2014). The increased consideration of human well-being in human-environment relationships has led to the emergence of 'social' meta-norms in environmental governance such as the protection of human rights, gender equality, social equity and environmental and social justice (Kooiman and Jentoft, 2009; Moore, 2012; Okereke, 2008a; Saunier and Meganck, 2007). Such social meta-norms now manifest in various forms at the global scale (e.g., the *Sustainable Development Goals*, and the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*), and are reflected in the contemporary objectives of many global environmental organizations. For example, the International Union for Conservation of Nature's 2017−2020 Programme pledges equity, social justice, transparency and inclusion to ensure that 'natural resource governance at all levels enables delivery of effective conservation and equitable social outcomes by integrating good governance principles and rights-based approaches' (IUCN, 2017).

While there has been sustained interest in the complex and subjective diffusion of environmental norms (e.g., Sandbrook et al., 2019), the process of diffusion and the practical influence (i.e., beyond written commitments) of social meta-norms remains under-explored and largely unknown (Acosta et al., 2019; Okereke, 2008a; Song et al., 2019). A review of global environmental governance literature conducted as part of this study reveals only three articles that explicitly explore the diffusion of social meta-norms in environmental governance (see Acosta et al., 2019; Okereke, 2008a; Song et al., 2019). Specifically, Okereke, 2008a finds the diffusion of equity norms in global environmental regimes relies on the extent norms align with neoliberal ideas and structures. In the context of coastal fisheries, Song et al. (2019) find global-level policy commitments on gender and human rights have gained minimal traction in national level policies of Pacific Island countries. Similarly, Acosta et al. (2019) find that while commitments to gender mainstreaming in Ugandan climate and agricultural policies have been formally adopted at the national level, the 'gender equality' norm is watered down at several stages of the policy cycle. Despite these findings, there has been little attempt to explain such incongruence more generally, especially to understand the mechanisms through which social meta-norms diffuse (or not) in environmental governance, making progress on the uptake and impact of these norms difficult to assess and achieve.

In this article, we seek to address this gap by developing a more robust understanding of how different drivers and responses shape, and are shaped by, meta-norm diffusion. We first targeted peer-reviewed environmental governance papers (covering various forms of natural resource management and multiscale environmental regimes) that explicitly explored the diffusion of social meta-norms; however, as mentioned above, this search only returned three articles. We then expanded our search to include broader governance literature on any form of social meta-norm diffusion (e.g., human rights, gender equality, women's and youth rights, equity and justice) (n = 73), in addition to examples of diffusion of broader meta-norms in environmental governance (e.g., protection of biodiversity and preservation of ecosystems) in our original search (n = 56). We identified 132 articles in total to be included in our review.

We used an inductive approach to first identify eight common drivers of social meta-norm diffusion from the literature (Fig. 1). Through a process of consultation and validation between the co-authors, we then characterised the drivers thematically along a spectrum ranging from prescriptive to non-prescriptive. This grouping revealed epistemological preferences within the literature. Analyses guided by conventional norm diffusion theory, for example, focused on prescriptive or compliance oriented drivers

(e.g., Thomson, 1993). Analyses grounded in constructionism and sociological institutionalism (e.g., Krook and True, 2010; Miller and Banaszak-Holl, 2005), by contrast, focused on non-prescriptive drivers. We then turned our attention to norm responses. We identified, based on similar terminology (or synonyms), five response types (Fig. 2), which confirmed other response typologies built for different sectors (e.g., Zimmerman, 2016). Our development of the response typology was largely guided by a constructionist epistemology as it allowed for a more nuanced view of responses (i.e., rather than just 'uptake' or 'presence/absence' which is the focus of conventional norm diffusion theory).

Based on our review, we argue that the limited (actual) diffusion of social meta-norms in environmental governance is best understood by drawing together conventional, discursive, and relational strands of norm diffusion theory and multiscale environmental governance scholarship. Conventional norm diffusion theory explains why and how norms spread (or fail to) according to prescriptive formal regulatory and normative forces, such as the strength of compliance and the economic 'fit' of a norm (Cortell and Davis, 2000). A newer strand of norm diffusion theory (drawing on constructionism, discursivism, and sociological institutionalism) underscores the agency of governance actors in the diffusion process and the meaning systems and cognitive frames shaping norm interpretation. This newer perspective highlights multi-actor translation, whereby actors are not passive recipients, rather they shift the meaning and content of meta-norms through processes of interpretation and contestation (Elgström, 2000; Krook and True, 2010; Lombardo et al., 2010; Wiener, 2009; Wiener and Puetter, 2009). A parallel strand of scholarship on multiscale environmental governance highlights the relational space between distinct levels of governance (i.e., global, regional, national and local including provincial and city governance structures) and probes the vertical movement and translation of environmental discourses across scales (Cash et al., 2006; Morrison, 2007). These various conventional, discursive and relational aspects of norm diffusion have been considered in isolation until now which has limited our full understanding.

The paper proceeds as follows. First, we offer a conceptual overview of norms and norm diffusion and highlight knowledge gaps pertaining to the lack of integrated studies exploring both the drivers and responses of social meta-norm diffusion in multiscale environmental governance (section 2). We then provide a synthesis of the drivers of diffusion, comprising both prescriptive and discursive drivers to reveal a more comprehensive range of the enabling and constraining mechanisms that shape how norms travel and become operationalized (section 3). Specifically, through considering the role of discursivism in this synthesis, we highlight the role of agency (i.e., of state actors and nonstate actors affiliated with local, national, regional, global or transnational governance organizations) in the norm interpretation process. We then draw from the synthesis to develop a typology of responses elicited by meta-norms in order to theorize the stages a norm passes through in the process towards internalization (i.e., reaching a point of individual actor conviction) (section 4). Finally, building on the evidence of discursive forces in norm diffusion, we hypothesize a potential interaction between drivers and responses by drawing these elements together in a conceptual diagnostic (section 5). Our diagnostic provides a crucial first step in developing a more complete understanding of the dynamics shaping social meta-norm diffusion in multiscale environmental governance.

2. Conceptualization of norms and norm diffusion

Global governance scholars have generally characterised three types of norms; meta-norms, constitutive norms, and practical

norms (adapted from Björkdahl, 2002; Hufty, 2011; Wiener, 2009). Meta-norms are global principles considered to promote 'justice and the good society' (Finnemore and Sikkink, 1998, p. 889). Also referred to as fundamental, global or international norms, they are typically global principles that may manifest in the form of international agreements and guidelines or aspirational goals such as the Sustainable Development Goals. By comparison, constitutive norms (also referred to as organizing principles) are policy or political processes within governance agencies that provide normative guidance for best practice (Wiener, 2009). Constitutive norms are non-prescriptive, leaving space for local reinvention of norm content (Krook and True, 2010). Examples of constitutive norms include; legitimacy, transparency, inclusiveness, and adaptability (for an overview of constitutive norms in natural resource management see Lockwood et al., 2010). In contrast, practical norms (also referred to as standardized procedures or regulatory norms) are, by design, relatively inflexible. Practical norms refer to the prescriptions, rules and regulations that delimit the conduct of individuals or groups, including sanctions and codes of conduct (Hufty, 2011). Examples of practical norms in environmental governance include the International Organization for Standardization 14000 standard for environmental management. Practical norms are also in the form of guidelines such as the Food and Agriculture Organization facilitated 'Voluntary Guidelines for Securing Sustainable Small-Scale Fisheries in the Context of Food Security and Poverty Eradication', where practical norms become manifestations of overarching meta-norms (FAO, 2015).

Global governance scholars use meta-norm diffusion theory to explore how norms emerge and travel across and between governance scales (Björkdahl, 2002; Krook and True, 2010). Scholars originally developed meta-norm diffusion models in the 1990s to describe how nation-states socialize into international communities (Checkel, 1999; Meyer et al., 1997; Strang and Meyer, 1993). These scholars focus on the way meta-norms diffuse and whether they achieve their intended outcomes (e.g., Finnemore and Sikkink, 1998; Keck and Sikkink, 1998; Strang and Meyer, 1993). Such characterizations emphasise the salience of political structures in shaping diffusion and tend to describe the process as linear and axiomatic, whereby norms first emerge, follow a global-to-local pathway, and eventually become internalized within local contexts. Increased recognition of women's political rights have frequently been described this way whereby; 'norm emergence' represented recognition of suffrage in Western countries, and in turn led to a global movement that reached a 'tipping point' of support. This followed a 'cascade' of normative change within domestic policies, whereby analysts have viewed suffrage as internalized once widely accepted in local settings (Finnemore and Sikkink, 1998, p. 896; Keck and Sikkink, 1998).

However, conventional norm diffusion theory has since been critiqued for its tendency to view norms as static and consequently failing to consider multidirectional influences on norm emergence and appropriation (Bernstein and Cashore, 2012). Some scholars have argued that the predominant focus on top-down diffusion has overlooked the complexities of how norms travel and are negotiated across and between different hierarchical scales of governance (Morrison, 2007; van der Vleuten et al., 2014). Greater analytical attention to the discursive nature of norm diffusion suggests that the pathways through which norms travel vary, and diffusion may occur top-down, laterally, bottom-up or in a dynamic and contested manner (van der Vleuten et al., 2014; Zwingel, 2012). There have been several important meta-norm diffusion studies that focus on global (Krook and True, 2010; Legro, 1997), regional (van der Vleuten et al., 2014) and domestic (Bernstein and Cashore, 2012; Cortell and Davis, 2000) levels of governance. These studies have also extended the focus on government and intergovernmental

actors, to private or nongovernment agencies operating in various multiscale relationships (Fejerskov, 2017; Morrison, 2017). Despite these developments, multiscale analyses remain less common.

Meta-norms are conventionally framed as 'good things' (e.g., Finnemore and Sikkink, 1998; Keck and Sikkink, 1998) that help propagate cooperative liberal values throughout global governance systems. Sociological institutionalists contend that this assumption views meta-norms as vehicles for the spread of hegemonic principles into domestic contexts (Schofer et al., 2012; Wiener, 2006). Governance actors are perceived as passive recipients of norms, eliding the fact that the people (i.e., individual citizens) towards whom meta-norms are targeted have their own voices, values and interests. A more recent elaboration of norm diffusion literature has brought greater analytical focus to the actors that promote and translate norms (Zimmermann, 2016; Zwingel, 2012). These theorists argue the emergence and appropriation of social meta-norms is highly contested, whereby norms rarely retain similar content, or the same intended effects across countries and time (Kardam, 2004; Krook and True, 2010; Okereke, 2008b; Roggeband et al., 2014; Zwingel, 2012). In this strand of scholarship, discursive, or cultural-cognitive drivers, as described by (Scott, 2013) (i.e., cultural compatibility and norm source), are also important analytical distinctions (Strang and Meyer, 1993). This perspective underscores the way governance actors interpret and contest norms as a pivotal component of norm diffusion (Krook and True, 2010; Wiener, 2009). Specifically, actors use their cultural-cognitive frames to negotiate norm meanings. This process is described elsewhere as norm 'bending', 'shrinking', or 'stretching' (e.g., Lombardo et al., 2010; Roggeband et al., 2014). However, while this body of scholarship is growing, the translation of meta-norms by governance actors remains under-researched. Consequently, the discursive nature of norm interpretation tends to be overlooked as a key element of meta-norm diffusion (Zimmermann, 2016).

Furthermore, while meta-norm diffusion scholarship spans diverse disciplines and governance sectors (i.e., law, health, education, humanities), the environmental governance sector has received less analytical attention. Recent studies have explored the diffusion of global environmental policies, such as voluntary sustainability standards (Derkx and Glasbergen, 2014) and policy themes including gender and human rights-based approaches (Song et al., 2019). These studies imply that both prescriptive drivers (i.e., regulations and sanctions) and discursive drivers (i.e., the extent and way norms resonate with actors in diverse social and cultural contexts) are influential in shaping how norms diffuse. Although not explicitly framed as 'diffusion of meta-norms', environmental governance scholarship offers rich empirical insights into the range of both prescriptive and non-prescriptive drivers shaping how norms diffuse in the environment sector.

Thus, there are three knowledge gaps in conventional understanding that limit understandings of the process shaping social-meta-norm diffusion. First, the discursive nature of norm interpretation and translation is undervalued in influencing meta-norm diffusion. Second, there is a lack of integrated studies looking at both the drivers and responses shaping meta-norm diffusion. Finally, there are few examinations of how social meta-norms spread in the context of multiscale environmental governance. In the remaining sections of this paper, we seek to overcome these gaps by emphasising the non-prescriptive nature of diffusion, and highlight the active role governance actors play in this process.

3. Drivers of social meta-norm diffusion

Here we draw together the theories and critiques of meta-norm diffusion to date and develop a synthesis of the drivers that shape diffusion (Fig. 1). Drawing from diverse disciplines, we identify and

Fig. 1. Spectrum of drivers influencing social meta-norm diffusion ranging from those that are formal, prescriptive and rational to more discursive, intangible and informal. The placement of the drivers along the continuum are for heuristic purposes only and are not yet a definite guide.

position eight drivers of diffusion on a spectrum ranging between those considered prescriptive through to discursive. The different drivers identified in the review are not intended as an exhaustive set; instead they offer an alternative explanation for the state of social meta-norms. Although we present each driver as distinct for analytic purposes, in reality they are inextricably connected or evolving together, often in response to rapidly shifting political and social contexts. Conventional meta-norm diffusion scholarship often overlooks this variety of drivers, focusing in depth on regulatory and normative drivers, with limited analytical attention to the discursive nature of norm diffusion.

We find that analyses guided by conventional norm diffusion theory predominantly present examples of formal and prescriptive (i.e., regulatory and normative) drivers which characteristically produce patterns of relatively predictable and/or stable behaviour through regulation or conformity of action (Meyer et al., 1997). These drivers often reflect visible top-down diffusion via formal policies, compliance and enforcement mechanisms, economic ideologies, or through institutions and their associated normative social rules. In contrast, articles grounded in constructionism and sociological institutionalism tended to provide examples of discursive drivers, which are more informal, and provide greater attention to actor agency and subjectivities (Krook and True, 2010; Lombardo et al., 2010). These drivers are often intangible and in many cases are dependent on the way and the extent norms resonate with actors across diverse social and cultural contexts (Song et al., 2019). We explicate these drivers with examples from environmental governance and/or explorations of social meta-norm diffusion from other sectors.

3.1. Compliance mechanisms

Conventional theorists suggest that meta-norms are societal rules where compliance with the principles of a norm is an effective way to achieve diffusion (i.e., through prescriptions and regulatory controls) (Thomson, 1993). In this sense, the impact of a meta-norm is judged by the degree such rules affect state behaviour, placing emphasis on formal prescriptions as evidence (Björkdahl, 2002). In environmental governance, examples of such compliance-based mechanisms include various hard laws including legally binding environmental treaties, conventions, policies and regulations that, for example, have been applied to the protection of endangered species or regulations on the use of chemicals and emissions (Bernstein and Cashore, 2012). These forms of compliance mechanisms use the 'logic of consequences', which rewards conformity (i.e., through material and financial incentives) and punishes noncompliance (i.e., through sanctions or loss of international legitimacy) (Gilardi, 2013).

Such forms of compliance do work in some contexts, for example *The Montreal Protocol on Substances that Deplete the Ozone*

Layer (1987), which was the first universally ratified treaty. However, scholars also caution that using prescriptive, and often punitive, mechanisms to drive the diffusion of social meta-norms is difficult due to their moral or ethical character, making them more elusive in different contexts (Goetz and Diehl, 1992). Consequently, global quests to facilitate diffusion of social meta-norms through compliance mechanisms alone have been found to yield limited results (e.g., Kardam, 2004; Okereke, 2008a; Zwingel, 2012 who specifically explore gender equality, equity and human rights norms). In these cases, formal legislation is perceived as futile. Hard laws can be deliberately drafted to be ambiguous, allowing flexibility in application but having no specific written obligations directed at nation-states ratifying agreements (Sindico and Gibson, 2016). In fact, human rights treaties have been described as ineffective and weak because they lack incentives for compliance (Zwingel, 2012). Yet, enforcement of norms at the national scale is still the dominant mechanism for effective multiscale governance in most countries.

Global environmental governance literature has been criticised for its over-emphasis on hard law compliance mechanisms as a causal driver of diffusion (Bernstein and Cashore, 2012). Using the case of climate governance in the European Union, for example, Jordan et al. (2012) illustrate the inconsistency between high policy ambition and weak implementation mechanisms. However, shifts away from prescriptive compliance and enforcement methods towards softer measures to shape environmental governance arrangements are increasingly evident. Soft laws, such as codes of conduct or voluntary guidelines, are argued to be less difficult to establish and change and can facilitate cooperation among relevant actors more so than hard laws (Skjærseth et al., 2006). Rather than a weakness, the absence of coercive mechanisms when enforcing social norms may become an advantage as the notion of governance is to solve a problem through 'mutual consultation and analysis, rather than an offence to be punished' (Chayes and Chayes, 1995, p. 26). Others argue the effectiveness of 'soft law' on environmental norms increases when coupled with hard law rules (Skjærseth et al., 2006). For example, the global climate regime consists of both elaborate legally binding frameworks and soft laws providing guidance for a multitude of actors (Karlsson-Vinkhuyzen and Kok, 2002) and can promote wider agreement on global climate commitments.

3.2. Economic benefit

There is strong agreement that prevailing economic conditions affect meta-norm diffusion at all scales of governance (e.g., Cortell and Davis, 2000; Dimitrov, 2016). Western industrialized countries have a commanding presence in global political economies and tend to perpetuate meta-norms linked to neoliberal economic

ideologies (Okereke, 2008b). Okereke (2008) explains that not only does promotion of economic ideologies assist in ensuring developed countries maintain their advantage over those less developed, it also ensures that global environmental governance cooperation does not overtly challenge the values of these societies. The most crucial driver determining 'successful' norm diffusion is argued to be contingent on the degree to which norms promote economic growth (Elgström, 2000), and whether norm requirements are achievable within the scope of pre-existing neoliberal economic order (Okereke, 2008b). As Dimitrov (2016) found during the 2015 climate negotiations in Paris, arguments framed in terms of economic benefit were most persuasive among political elites in adoption of the agreement (a constitutive norm). However, while framing social meta-norms in economic terms may facilitate diffusion, this may also promote instrumentalist and essentialist views of norms (see Leach, 2007 for an overview of the risks of essentialist portrayals of gender through environmental development). Such perspectives risk promoting norm adoption at the expense of watering down the inherent qualities of a norm and simplifying governance problems.

3.3. Functional interaction

Norm diffusion between more than two policy domains is complex (Morrison, 2017). Structuralist accounts of meta-norm diffusion suggest the integration of 'new norms' such as gender equality arise in normative spaces where they must contend for support with other norms and priorities (Finnemore and Sikkink, 1998). Increasing multi-lateral agreements in environmental governance have led to what is termed 'treaty congestion', compounded by 'regime density', where there is an intersection of norms, governance agencies, legal systems and policy domains (Stokke, 2002, p. 147). Functional interaction between differing treaties and policy domains arise when regimes deal with issues that relate (i.e., biodiversity and climate change) or due to regime overlap (i.e., where global and regional governance objectives and jurisdictions intersect) (Visseren-Hamakers et al., 2011). It is generally thought, the higher the structural density of governance regimes with intersecting policy domains (i.e., water, agriculture, energy), the lower the likelihood of norm integration (Karlsson-Vinkhuyzen and Kok, 2002) and effectiveness of norms in influencing behaviours (Bernstein and Cashore, 2012). In the case of social meta-norm diffusion, the structural density of intersecting policy domains is a barrier to diffusion. Song et al. (2019) and Acosta et al. (2019) problematize this predicament in terms of lack of willingness, interest and importance placed on the integration of gender issues within fisheries, agriculture and climate policies respectively.

Despite being a requirement for sustainable development, functional interaction of differing policy domains presents a considerable analytical and practical challenge where successes are few (Karlsson-Vinkhuyzen and Kok, 2002). Achieving multidirectional integration often necessitates a fundamental shift in constitutive and/or practical norms, beliefs and behaviours of actors within these systems (Karlsson-Vinkhuyzen and Kok, 2002). The integration process is likely to cause conflicts with existing interests, challenge power relations and raise public concerns (Bernstein and Cashore, 2012). However, structural complexity can also mask changes in norms (see Morrison, 2017), signalling the risks of relying on prescriptive drivers alone to explain and measure diffusion. There is significant potential to better manage the interplay of diffusion between functionally linked policy domains by focusing on collaboration and joint establishment of best practices among governance actors to foster integration and better account for trade-offs (Karlsson-Vinkhuyzen and Kok, 2002).

3.4. Institutional normative environment

Institutional architectures influence the spread of meta-norms (Biermann et al., 2009b; Fejerskov, 2017). Institutional architectures refer to the practices or 'cultures' of governance agencies and their associated normative ideologies (Haas, 1999; Meuleman, 2010). Political predisposition to adhere to norms can shape the normative fit of social norms (Cortell and Davis, 2000) and the compatibility of the norm with specific sets of shared values, interests and beliefs of the nation-state, governance agency or other influential groups (Checkel, 1999). To demonstrate the significance of institutional normative environments in social meta-norm diffusion, Fejerskov (2017) uses the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation (BMGF) (an international nongovernmental development organization) as a case to document the process of institutionalizing gender equality and consequent changes in the discourse and practices of the organization. In this study, the BMGF's efforts to keep pace with international development discourse required bringing gender equality, a prominent social meta-norm, to the forefront of the organization's priorities. Such a shift in focus lead to distinct changes in the political and social character of the organization. Yet, the high interpretability of gender equality meant such transitions were not prescriptive and negotiated in keeping with the organization's objectives.

The degree to which meta-norms converge with dominant ideologies and practices within governance agencies influences diffusion (Keck and Sikkink, 1998). The importance of understanding normative ideologies is highlighted by Biermann et al. (2009b) who reflect on the highly fragmented nature of environmental governance, where underpinning ideologies influence how norms are interpreted, success is measured, and the design and application of management tools and approaches. Tensions between ideologies are illustrated by Lockwood and Davidson (2010) who explore the influence of three distinct ideologies (neoliberalism, localism and ecocentrism) competing to establish their natural resource governance agendas in Australia. The results highlight that normative ideologies can legitimize norms, leading to different meanings and inducing different responses. In some cases, there may be some disagreement over the nature of outcomes where a diverse set of governance agencies and individual actors understand social-ecological functions and dynamics differently (Leach et al., 2010). Other studies have found that competing ideologies can also lead to the convergence of environmental governance goals (Morrison and Lane, 2006). Nevertheless, significant scope remains to explore the impact of normative ideologies to more clearly conceptualize and draw case comparisons on the drivers shaping meta-norm diffusion in complex multiscale governance systems (Morrison et al., 2017).

3.5. Norm source

Norm source refers to the person or group of persons promoting a particular norm and those supporting the canvassing of its principles (Franck, 1990; Okereke, 2008a). In environmental governance, as in many other contexts, the perceived conviction or legitimacy of the norm source correlates with the degree to which ideas are received (Moore, 2012; Okereke, 2008a). By tracing the integration of equity norms into the Law of the Sea Treaty (1970), Okereke (2008a) argues that the stature and presentation style of the Maltese Ambassador, Arvid Pardo, a persuasive norm advocate, influenced the internalization of this norm. By contrast, 'norm receivers' (i.e., actors to be persuaded) may resist or obstruct norm diffusion if they see the source of the norm as illegitimate. In many cases, norm resistance occurs when norm recipients perceive ideas as exogenous to them; that is, as universalistic world models 'not strongly anchored in local

circumstances' (Meyer et al., 1997, p. 156). For example, developing nation-states may perceive norms to be originating from Western states, and their views and assumptions of global values (Meyer et al., 1997). Scholars have found this to be particularly true in the case of gender equality norms (e.g., Kardam, 2004). In many instances, actors will be reluctant to engage in meaningful change strategies if they view norms as foreign in conception and propagation, or where conviction for the norm is lacking.

3.6. Norm issue framing

How actors frame a meta-norm and the nature of the issue-area influences the chance of norm internalization (Jordan et al., 2012; Okereke, 2008a). Norm specificity is essential for governance actors to consider a norm legitimate (Franck, 1990). The assumption that all meta-norms are 'good things' (Finnemore and Sikkink, 1998; Keck and Sikkink, 1998) reinforces the notion that norms are static, and suggests responses will be binary between norm-abiding communities (where actors have adopted 'better' behaviours) and deviants. Yet, a sociological perspective suggests such dichotomized views only serve to reinforce a view of 'us' (norm proponents) versus 'them' (norm violators) (Zwingel, 2012). Sociological institutionalists argue that meta-norm diffusion scholarship has been preoccupied with norm acceptance or rejection rather than critically examining how norms are constructed, and whose interests meta-norms may, or may not, privilege (Schofer et al., 2012).

Many forms of governance are characterised by networks of actors working across scales, sectors and geographies, who are united (to differing degrees) by their aim to maintain and drive improvements within these systems (Leach et al., 2010; Morrison, 2007). However, these governance actors follow different narratives and ideologies that frame problems and potential solutions. Given the pluralism of views and motives, environmental governance objectives may not necessarily converge or complement each other (Leach et al., 2010; Mace, 2014). Within the environmental governance community, for example, there can be friction between those that prioritise biodiversity conservation and those that view natural resource management as the means to address food security and human wellbeing priorities (Bennett et al., 2017; Matulis and Moyer, 2017). The pluralism between social-driven and conservation-driven objectives in environmental governance suggests the interpretation of social meta-norms by organizations and actors may differ.

As social-meta norms evolve into constitutive and practical forms, they often remain ambiguous and lack prescriptions about how a norm is to be operationalized (Kooiman and Jentoft, 2009; Okereke, 2008a). Yet, diffusion literature rests on the problematic assumption that norms are unequivocally definable. For example, Song et al. (2019) found significant variation in the interpretation of gender related commitments among fisheries actors in international, regional and national fisheries policies and guidelines across three Pacific Island countries. These responses ranged from vague to concrete. Such examples suggest there is a tension between prescriptive policies and enforceable action, on the one hand, and the freedom for interpretation and tailoring provided by voluntary or broad commitments on the other hand. In translating social meta-norms into practice, these findings emphasise the challenge of maintaining flexibility in interpretability of norms, while simultaneously effecting change in action.

3.7. Cultural resonance

All forms of governance, irrespective of their objective, have a cultural dimension. The values, attitudes and beliefs of a given group of governors are reflections of their cultures (Meuleman, 2010). Early norm diffusion research suggested that cultural resonance with a norm occurs when 'the prescriptions embodied in an international norm are convergent with domestic norms' (Checkel, 1999, p. 97; Legro, 1997). In cases where there is 'no congruence' with a norm, the domestic culture is perceived as a barrier to diffusion (Checkel, 1999, p. 87). The extreme of this view then suggests that local culture either provides resonance for a norm, or it does not (Zimmermann, 2016). However, the idea of resonance can present an essentialist depiction of local culture and domestic governance structures 'as both inhibiting change and resisting change themselves' (Zimmermann, 2016, p. 100). The Western 'conservation ethic' can be viewed as distinct from motivations playing out in indigenous cultural practices (e.g., Johannes, 2002) even where cultural practices may be seen as equivalent to contemporary environmental conservation strategies. Without this nuanced understanding, efforts to promote conservation practice as an environmental norm may lead to actions that are designed or implemented in socially inappropriate ways (Foale et al., 2011). Consequently, scholars have turned their attention to understanding the various outcomes of norm promotion in different locales (e.g., Meuleman, 2010; Zimmermann, 2016; Zwingel, 2012). Specifically referring to gender equality norms, Zwingel (2012, p. 126) argues, 'the key to norm translation is that gender equality norms are to the largest extent possible cross-culturally negotiated rather than imposed'. This argument is echoed by Acosta et al. (2019) who challenge the assumption that global gender equality norms have transformative potential if there is no room for context specific translations or the navigation of local norms in domestic policies.

3.8. Societal temper

The success of meta-norm diffusion is subject to the wider societal temper in which diffusion takes place. Also referred to as the 'moral temper' of the international community (Okereke, 2008a, p. 26), societal temper is characterised by a host of drivers including; the economic prosperity of an era, social movements, scientific breakthroughs, technological advancements, the frequency of large-scale natural disasters and the emergence of novel challenges, among others (Okereke, 2008a; Saunier and Meganck, 2007). The incidence, scale and alignment of these drivers can alter international political dialogue and norm priorities, issues, responsibilities and commitments (Okereke, 2008a). Interaction with, and participation in, transnational networks is also important for the distribution of norms, and scholars have highlighted the influence of civil society, donor, and partner support on norm diffusion (Bernstein and Cashore, 2012). Environmental governance is also often problem driven, therefore the moral temper of a particular era could be used as proxy for determining the likelihood of internalization of social meta-norms depending on whether the social context is favourable or unfavourable (Meyer et al., 1997; Okereke, 2008a).

4. Responses shaping social meta-norm diffusion

As we have stressed, meta-norm diffusion literature has tended to understate the importance of ensuring norms resonate with governance actors and overemphasized the formal and prescriptive drivers promoting global level norm setting. More focus is also needed on the process of norm interpretation between global and local governance scales (Cortell and Davis, 2000; Roggeband et al., 2014; Zwingel, 2012). A small but growing body of literature suggests there is also a need to clarify the responses that meta-norms invoke, due to the limited conceptual ability of the range of prescriptive and discursive drivers to explain the

outcomes of norm diffusion (Hufty, 2011; Zimmermann, 2016; Zwingel, 2012).

The success of the diffusion process has previously been measured according to the degree of compliance by norm receivers (e.g., Keck and Sikkink, 1998). The dominant analogy provided by innovation dissemination in agricultural research or evaluation would be to determine if a new technology was present and utilised by more and more farmers at greater intensity (e.g., Shikuku et al., 2019). However, using conventional models of diffusion leaves limited space to understand the potentially complex processes of interpretation and translation where 'the outcomes of norm diffusion can only ever be described as deficient, never as different' (Zimmermann, 2016, p. 103). Rather than viewing norms as finished products, constructionism conceptualizes diffusion as a process where norms are contested and (re) interpreted by various actors in diverse settings (Elgström, 2000; Kardam, 2004; Krook and True, 2010). Constructionists perceive these actors as dynamic components of nonlinear norm diffusion pathways (Zwingel, 2012). Actor responses are not necessarily static and are influenced by various drivers of diffusion, such as norm source and norm framing as described previously; meaning a response by the same actor can change over time. For instance, an actor could contest a norm, and then resist, or actively seek to implement, and then contest. Different actors within any society, organization, or nation could also experience multiple responses simultaneously.

A small number of frameworks draw analytical attention to actors roles in norm formulation (Hufty, 2011; Wiener and Puetter, 2009), norm integration into governance systems (van der Vleuten et al., 2014), or response stages to norm adoption (Zimmermann, 2016). Yet, environmental governance has not fully benefited from this analytical attention. We draw together diverse strands of diffusion literature to extend Zimmerman's (2016) work on norm adoption, in order to develop five response types shaping meta-norm diffusion in environmental governance (Fig. 2). We group these responses based on similar terminology (or synonyms). While the response types are treated separately here, in reality we expect the distinctions between them are blurrier with potential overlaps and hybrids.

4.1. Resistance

Resistance as a concept has begun to gain traction in areas of environmental social science, including social-ecological resilience thinking (e.g., Brown, 2016; Herrfahrdt-Pähle and Pahl-Wostl, 2012). Resistance in its most basic form implies the capacity of an individual to resist change. Resistance is often viewed as a significant barrier to meta-norm diffusion and may occur when a norm is incompatible with established interests, ideas and practices (Cortell and Davis, 2000; Fejerskov, 2017). This is well illustrated in conservation practice where historically many conservation organizations and funders have relied purely on natural sciences to inform their approaches. Yet, Bennett et al. (2017) suggest that increased pressure to integrate social science perspectives (i.e., attention to the human dimensions of conservation) has been met with resistance due to a perceived 'threat' that social science poses to engrained institutional norms and practices of conservation organizations. This example illustrates potential tensions between two sets of norms in the one 'operating space', and resistance presents an impediment to integrative conservation science.

Relatedly, some sociological and political science perspectives associate resistance with power, enabling individuals to determine their own strategies for change (Brown, 2016). Specifically referring to policy diffusion, Meijerink and Huitema (2010) argue actors resisting policies use strategies similar to those actors who promote them. Actors may use resistance as a means to exercise agency against forms of domination (Scott, 1989). Resistance is argued to be far more influential than other responses norm diffusion may evoke (Wiener, 2009), as it has qualities of defiance, persistence and de-legitimisation that can eventually erode and/or protect norms (Scott, 1989). Through enacting resistance, actors can rework norms for local contexts. In this sense, resistance offers opportunities to challenge the top-down diffusion model that views actors and governance agencies as merely norm receivers (see also 'empty vessel model', Schulman, 1986). In the case of conservation, resistance may serve as a mechanism to oppose powerful interests that may undermine biodiversity conservation efforts (Matulis and Moyer, 2017) and disrupt political structures that have facilitated environmental devastation (Peterson et al., 2013). Simultaneously,

	Resistance Capacity to withstand changes associated with a norm	Rhetorical Adoption Adoption of a norm is detached from action and compliance	Contestation Interpretation and shifting meaning of a norm	Implementation Practical application of a norm	Internalization Norm becomes a constitutive part of institutional and individual behavior and identity
Synonym	Abandonment, block, deferment, defence, defiance, false compliance, indifference, inhibit, obstinacy, opposition, rejection	Decoupling, incomplete internalization, lip-service, partial compliance, symbolic commitment	Adaptation, amendment, argumentation, conflict, (re)interpretation, modification, mutation, (re)negotiation, norm-bending, norm-shrinking, re-defining, reinvention, translation	Appropriation, embracement, embedding, integration, sustained adoption	Acceptance, domestication, institutionalization, localization, success, vernaculization
Source	Elgström (2000); Fejerskov (2017); Graham et al. (2012); Matulis and Moyer (2017); McGee (2016); Roggeband et al. (2014); Saunier and Meganck (2007); Scott (1989); Wiener and Puetter (2009); Zimmermann (2016)	Cortell and Davis (2000); Meyer et al. (1997); Saunier and Meganck (2007); Zimmermann (2016)	Cardenas (2007); Checkel (1999); Dimitrov (2016); Elgström (2000); Florini (1996); Graham et al. (2012); Kardam (2004); Krook and True (2010); Peterson et al. (2013); Roggeband et al. (2014); Wiener (2009); Wiener and Puetter (2009); Zwingel (2012)	Cortell and Davis (2000); Finnemore and Sikkink (1998); Graham et al. (2012); Martinsson (2011); Zimmermann (2016)	Checkel (1999); Cortell and Davis (2000); Elgström (2000); Finnemore and Sikkink (1998); Krook and True (2010); Martinsson (2011); Okereke (2008a); Wiener and Puetter (2009); Zimmermann (2016); Zwingel (2012)

Fig. 2. Typology of responses elicited by meta-norms grouped according to synonymous terms sourced in norm diffusion and global governance literature.

actors may also use resistance to oppose competing conservation goals or efforts that are not in keeping with their own values and worldview (e.g., Hansen et al., 2014). For example, the marine conservation agenda in the Asia-Pacific region has faced some opposition on the basis that it reflects neoliberal and Western conservation values, rather than the wellbeing or needs of local people (Clifton and Foale, 2017).

4.2. Rhetorical adoption

International relations scholars, who argue there is a disconnect between adopted policies and their translation into practice, have inspired the idea of rhetorical adoption. This response typically involves governments or agencies rhetorically accepting or committing to a norm in the form of a policy or law, but the norm is detached from practical implementation, action and compliance (Meyer et al., 1997; Zimmermann, 2016). Rhetorical adoption reflects strategic motives whereby societies and governance actors may have little to no interest in enforcing meta-norms, rather, their adoption is representative of their quest for international legitimacy (Zimmermann, 2016). A contemporary example by Morrison et al., 2020 illustrates how aspirations for international legitimacy through gaining World Heritage Status are masked by the rhetorical adoption of global commitments to environmental preservation. In terms of social meta-norms, a neoliberalist perspective posits that governments commit to such norms (i.e., ratification of human rights treaties) as a means to increase their international legitimacy rather than reflecting intentions to implement them (Zwingel, 2012). For this reason, some governance scholars characterise meta-norms as symbolic, weak and ineffective, as they do not offer incentives or motivation for compliance to act upon such issues (Saunier and Meganck, 2007; Skjærseth et al., 2006; Zwingel, 2012).

Rhetorical adoption responses are also prevalent among non-state actors primarily within developmental regimes (Zimmermann, 2016). Although nonstate actors may have their own governing structures and directives, they are often willing to expand their agendas in response to emerging meta-norms, particularly if this means funding becomes more available (Zwingel, 2012). Other research suggests rhetorical adoption occurs when governance agencies feel pressured or obliged to adopt certain meta-norms (i.e., due to conditionality of funding), but do not have the willingness, skills or knowledge on how to translate these principles into practice (Fejerskov, 2017; Zimmermann, 2016). As meta-norms transfer into constitutive and practical forms, governance agencies may be constrained by funding, external support (i.e., research and monitoring and evaluation), recruitment choices and their internal capacity (or education) to appropriately adopt, implement and internalize these norms (Haas, 1999). Such constraints suggest that while commitment to a meta-norm may represent a step towards norm adoption, the extent to which the norm impacts upon its issue area in practice may vary significantly (Roggeband et al., 2014).

4.3. Contestation

In global governance, the emergence of meta-norms may occur as direct, and deliberate, outcome of international negotiations (Biermann et al., 2009b). However, ratification of global or regional environmental treaties rarely leads to unequivocal adoption by regional and national governments or agencies (Hettiarachchi et al., 2015). Meta-norms are dynamic and often have contested meanings that may even lead to the emergence of new norms (Krook and True, 2010). This process of contestation may be ongoing with strong probability that norms will shift in meaning overtime (Moore, 2012; Wiener and Puetter, 2009). A regional examination

of gender equality norms (via process tracing) shows how the 'movement' of this norm through various stages of policy formulation led to new interpretations between different scales of governance and also through time (Roggeband et al., 2014). The negotiation of meta-norms can enable different governance actors to advance their interests. In the case of international climate negotiations, Moore (2012) documents a process of norm contestation, where developing countries protested against developed country control over practical norms (in this case climate change adaptation funding). Yet, environmental governance scholars rarely directly examine norm contestation, leaving the interpretation process and its influence in meta-norm diffusion unclear (Morrison et al., 2017). By acknowledging the continuing evolution of meta-norms, the role of actors as co-creators of norms becomes clear, opposing the assumption that actor responses are bound to a binary 'accept' or 'reject' (Roggeband et al., 2014).

4.4. Implementation

Implementation refers to how an established meta-norm actually fares in practice, often associated with the operationalization of domestic policies (Keck and Sikkink, 1998). Constructionists argue however, that the implementation stage is rarely fixed; rather, it involves the continuous negotiation of norms by norm advocates, particularly when there is substantial norm opposition (Elgström, 2000; Roggeband et al., 2014; Wiener and Puetter, 2009). The formulation of domestic policies corresponding with a meta-norm instigates a new stage of policy negotiation and re-formulation (Roggeband et al., 2014). Sociological institutionalist scholars Haas (1999) and Strang and Meyer (1993) suggest that evidence of successful diffusion in one context invokes desires for connected actors (i.e., neighbouring states in these cases) to emulate norm implementation practices. In terms of constitutive and practical norms however, Jordan and Huitema (2014) suggest that learning, competition and coercion, rather than imitation, are what motivates nation-states to emulate one another when referring to the diffusion of climate polices. Despite some notable exceptions (e.g., Sabatier, 1986), there is insufficient scholarship devoted to implementation. This highlights opportunities for future research to trace the translation of meta-norms into constitutional and practical forms.

4.5. Internalization

Full internalization of a meta-norm is the final stage or 'success' of diffusion (Zimmermann, 2016). Early norm diffusion scholarship suggested that internalization transpires when 'norms acquire a taken-for-granted quality and are no longer a matter of broad public debate' and become a constitutive part of institutional and individual behaviours and identities (Finnemore and Sikkink, 1998, p. 895). While norm contestation and implementation phases may require collective efforts, internalization depends on individual actor conviction (Zimmermann, 2016). Collective agency can be influential in this process, particularly when civil society and social movements are significant in norm promotion and spread. Actors within any society, organization, and/or nation may internalize norms, whilst others may remain sceptical, hostile, indifferent, or resistant. Actors who have internalized a norm become norm advocates or norm entrepreneurs and may partake in persuasion processes to promote the meta-norm among other actors (Elgström, 2000). Environmental psychology studies offer many examples of the internalization of pro-environmental behaviours (e.g., Byerly et al., 2018), however few studies have managed to document social meta-norm internalization in the context of environmental governance.

5. Discussion and future directions

Social meta-norms are essential to promoting best practice, equity, and effectiveness in environmental governance, however successful translation into national and local action is seldom observed (Acosta et al., 2019; Okereke, 2008a; Song et al., 2019). While social scientists have identified and examined a range of drivers and responses influencing diffusion, they have to date been examined in relative isolation from each other. By drawing together the theories and critiques of meta-norm diffusion, we have developed a diagnostic to understand the drivers and responses that construct diffusion pathways. This diagnostic helps to explore why and how norms travel, and why in many cases they fail to achieve their intended aims (Fig. 3).

The diagnostic elements we identify illustrate that social meta-norm diffusion is driven by, and oscillates between, various regulatory and normative forces, but is also shaped by discursive factors. These drivers have bearing on the responses that social meta-norms may invoke. Specifically, our synthesis of norm responses suggests that 'successful' diffusion is determined by the extent norms are internalized, a process that is largely dependent on the extent norms resonate with individual actors. Understanding how the responses of actors at different scales may differ (as a function of the nature of the norm, as well as shaping the process of diffusion itself) will have implications for the sustainability and scale of outcomes (e.g., Mills et al., 2019). Our results suggest multiscale diffusion is likely to involve a process of norm negotiation and re-interpretation, to ultimately generate shifts in actor behaviours, interests, beliefs and practices.

The significance of actor agency in the diffusion process implies that a focus only on drivers is insufficient to understand the diffusion process. For instance, our synthesis raises questions about the extent that formal and prescriptive drivers of meta-norm diffusion alone (i.e., ratification of human rights norms into domestic environmental laws) are able to reach deep-seated internalized support for such norms among individual actors. Similarly, only focusing on the responses social meta-norms may invoke, overlooks the dynamic range of drivers shaping norm responses. To understand the extent social meta-norms have an impact in environmental governance, the diffusion process needs to be viewed as dynamic and integrated. In fact, this need extends to other social or governance innovations where contestation, flexibility and adjustment are inherent in the very definition of the innovation and its success (e.g., adaptive co-management; Plummer et al., 2013). This messiness reflects a contemporary challenge for all diffusion research to extend beyond linear conceptions of diffusion, simplistic measures of presence/absence, or normative views of what successful diffusion or 'uptake' would look like.

The interconnectedness of the drivers and responses also raises questions about the potential tensions of promoting particular drivers over others, and the consequences this has for norm responses. Future empirical applications could analyze the cause and effect interactions of these elements in multiscale contexts. This may involve tracing the diffusion of social meta-norms enshrined in global goals, policies or agreements such as the Sustainable Development Goals, or that of specific social meta-norms, such as gender equality, within diverse environmental governance agencies, projects and contexts. This is particularly poignant in cases where governance agencies may lack the willingness, resources or knowledge to meaningfully translate these principles into practice. Relatedly, full consensus and coordinated action of nation-states may not be attainable making it difficult to uphold the environmental standards essential for effective governance of the Earth's system (Biermann, 2012). International enforcement has limits so as not to undermine the sovereignty of nations. When meta-norms are imposed as universalistic expectations or are perceived as foreign in conception and propagation, it is likely to fuel resistance among nation-states. To ensure social meta-norm diffusion does not play out as neo-colonial agendas or treat actors as passive recipients, these investments should prioritise spaces for negotiation, co-production, interpretation and contestation so that norm-fit and 'local' legitimacy are prioritised over resemblance to another or the original interpretation. In fact, our review highlights that the absence of coercive mechanisms for the diffusion of social meta-norms may be more effective in the sense that spaces are opened up for norm negotiation and contestation. This may help in the diffusion of 'new norms' (e.g., human rights) that have not been traditionally considered or applied. Hence, to avoid tokenism and rhetorical adoption of social principles, this may mean embracing the process of norm contestation in these negotiations and identifying the uptake of an adjusted or interpreted variation of the norm as legitimate. Whether this flexibility and adjustment risks dilution (i.e., the interpreted version of the norm into action is so weak that it doesn't resemble or achieve the original intent) would require context specific research and assessment.

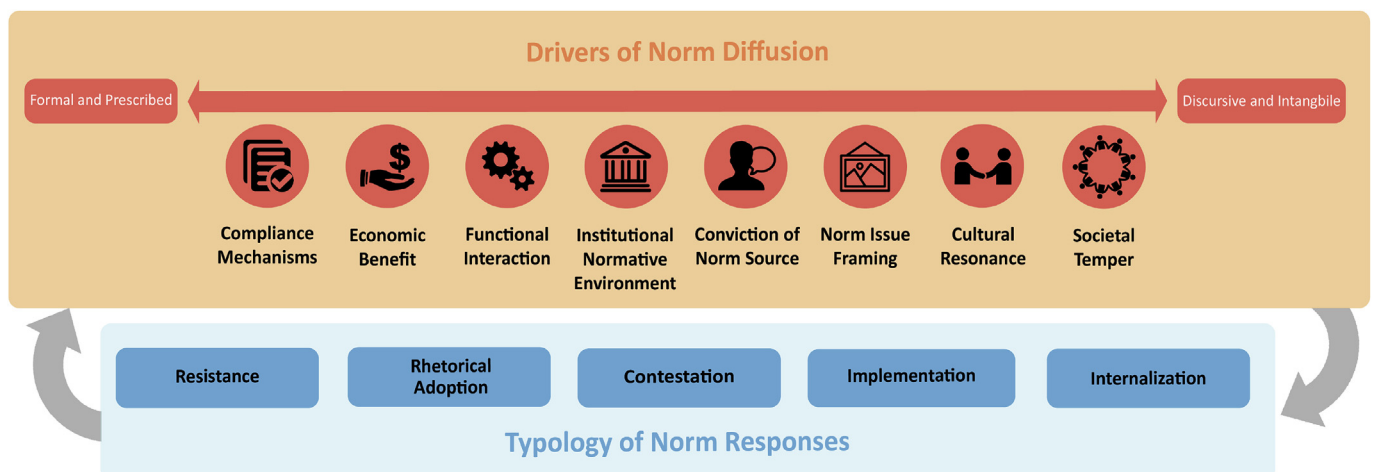Given norm diffusion scholarship has rarely been applied to

Fig. 3. Meta-norm diffusion comprises of intersecting drivers and responses. Each driver and response is presented as distinct for analytic purposes; however, in reality they are linked, interacting and evolving.

social meta-norms in the context of environmental governance, the drivers and responses identified are largely informed through a review of the literature across diverse disciplines. Although the breadth of insights within this diagnostic facilitates a deeper and more holistic understanding of the potential mechanisms and role of cognition in shaping how norms evolve and spread in complex environmental governance settings, we hold that further research will help assess the extent to which these are applicable for different fields and scales of environmental governance. Ultimately, future studies would work toward determining the extent social meta-norms are 'good' (i.e., in promoting equitable and just outcomes) through environmental practice, as opposed to merely conveying an image of 'doing good' without concerted effort to implement and adhere to social meta-norms. We argue that to move beyond social meta-norms on paper will require investment in and recognition of translation processes and norm adjustments as they shape environmental practice.

Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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