USING KNOWLEDGE CO-PRODUCTION
TO IMPROVE COLLABORATIVE APPROACHES TO GOVERNANCE FOR WATER

ROB DE LOË, FACULTY OF ENVIRONMENT, UNIVERSITY OF WATERLOO

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Canadian Water Network

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PROJECT MOTIVATIONS

In communities across the country, Canadians are searching for innovative ways to deal with shared water challenges and opportunities. These are numerous and include protecting sources of drinking water, supporting existing and new economic activities that use water, providing safe water for human consumption, sharing water during times of scarcity, and ensuring that water is available for environmental needs, to name a few.

In years past, Canadians expected governments to manage water for the common good. Governments remain the most important players because of their constitutional and legal responsibilities for water management in Canada. However, collaboration among governments (municipal, First Nation, provincial and federal), the agricultural sector, industry, environmental groups, and the general public has become common. This approach to addressing shared challenges and opportunities is part of a larger change in governance for water and the environment that is taking place around the world. Often it simply reflects the fact that water problems are too complex to be dealt with by one group or organization on its own.

This CWN "knowledge application" project was motivated by issues and concerns raised by Canadian practitioners involved in various multi-actor processes for water governance. At a 2012 workshop organized by the Water Policy and Governance Group (WPGG), practitioners from across Canada identified many challenges and priorities. Two of these priorities stood out:

- Tackling challenges relating to the implementation of collaborative, multi-actor approaches to governance for water, and,
- Building capacity to learn lessons from the experiences of other jurisdictions.

ADDRESSING THE PRACTITIONER PRIORITIES

In knowledge co-production projects, researchers and practitioners generate new knowledge together. This principle guided the team's work. Priorities and concerns identified by Canadian practitioners not only provided the starting point for the project, but also shaped each of its three stages:

- Inventory of approaches;
- Surveys of challenges and opportunities; and
- In-person forum to share knowledge and experiences.

> "We can't do things in this catchment without collaborating with others. It is just the nature of land ownership, the regulatory framework and the range of stakeholders who have an interest in the rivers."
>
> *Chairperson, River Trust, England*

INVENTORY: UNDERSTANDING THE LANDSCAPE OF COLLABORATION

Many collaborative, multi-actor approaches to governance for water exist in Canada – and each one is unique. Understanding the nature and diversity of Canadian processes was a key first step. WPGG researchers completed a wide-ranging inventory and assessment of "multi-actor" approaches to governance for water in Canada that revealed how people and organizations in Canada are coming together to address shared water challenges and opportunities.

Basic information about organizations was collected by WPGG researchers using published sources and the internet. Follow-up fact checking by email and telephone with people from the organizations helped to confirm the information collected. Project team members then reviewed a synthesis of the findings from the inventory and provided key insights that shaped the next stage.

WHAT ARE COLLABORATIVE, MULTI-ACTOR APPROACHES TO GOVERNANCE FOR WATER?

"Collaboration" refers to situations where independent (autonomous) organizations come together to pursue shared goals that serve a public purpose. Kirk Emerson, a guest collaboration expert from the University of Arizona, emphasized that collaboration is used to address complex problems that cannot be easily solved within one organization. Additionally, she pointed out that truly collaborative processes are based on voluntary engagement, and involve shared authority and decision making. This perspective is common in the professional and academic literature where collaborative processes are studied.

SURVEYS: EVALUATING CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

The inventory also provided a list of active "practitioner experts" in Canada. Drawing on this list, 29 practitioners who were willing to participate in two anonymous surveys and a follow-up in-person forum were selected. The list included two kinds of practitioners: (1) provincial government officials who organized and directed multi-actor processes, and (2) people involved in those processes, for example, as executive directors, board members, or agency representatives. The 29 participants were drawn from all regions of the country.

Participants completed two anonymous surveys, each having two rounds.

- In the first round of Survey A, study participants identified circumstances under which multi-actor approaches were appropriate or inappropriate. All responses were then synthesized and sent back in a second round for evaluation.
- In Survey B, participants identified outcomes that multi-actor approaches are either particularly well or poorly suited to achieving. As in Survey A, all ideas were synthesized and sent back in a second round for evaluation.

Together the two surveys allowed the survey participants to dig deeply into key issues, to interact with each other anonymously, and to highlight priority themes for the forum.

FORUM: PUTTING IT ALL TOGETHER

Peer-to-peer learning is essential for building capacity. Therefore, the project culminated in a forum that provided participants with a chance to learn from each other, to share ideas, and to make connections that would last well beyond the project's end.

Insights collected from the surveys guided the design and delivery of the forum Opportunities to Improve Multi-Actor approaches to Water Governance (May 13-14, 2014, Guelph, Ontario). The 30 forum participants included members of the core team, project partners, and most of the practitioners who had completed the two surveys.

The forum included presentations by project researchers, panel discussions by practitioners, and four highly interactive sessions tailored to needs that practitioners had previously identified.

WHAT DID WE LEARN?

THE LANDSCAPE OF COLLABORATIVE, MULTI-ACTOR GOVERNANCE FOR WATER IN CANADA IS VERY DIVERSE

Through the inventory, it became clear that no template for collaborative, multi-actor water governance exists in Canada. Instead, people are collaborating in many different ways that reflect local circumstances and needs. This section provides highlights from the inventory.

HOW TO LEARN MORE ABOUT THE PROJECT

For more information about the project and future publications that resulted from this work, visit www.wpgg.ca or contact Project Lead Rob de Loë (rdeloe@uwaterloo.ca).

"Often in government we use a multi-actor process because we don't know what we want."

Forum participant

- Multi-actor processes are being used for many different reasons in Canada. In some cases, they were created in response to a crisis; often people turned to them because previous efforts to resolve problems were not successful.
- Many of the processes emerged through local initiative, where people realized a common problem existed, and came together to address it. These examples tended to have unique mandates and organizational structures. However, several examples also exist of "systems" of multi-actor organizations; these were usually created through government legislation or policy, and thus they share similar organizational structures. Les organismes de bassin in Québec (a system of collaborative organizations) exist because of the Québec water policy of 2002. In contrast, the Cowichan Watershed Board in British Columbia (an individual organization) was created through an agreement among First Nations, municipal, provincial, and federal government actors in the watershed.
- Organizations inventoried for this project collaborated to achieve many different aims, including stewardship and outreach, habitat and ecosystem restoration, watershed planning, water management, conflict management, and source water protection – to name common examples. They rarely engaged in only one kind of activity, and they commonly added and subtracted activities due to changes in membership, new funding opportunities, or shifts in provincial policy.
- Membership profiles of the organizations inventoried were exceptionally diverse. Many had "open" memberships, and sought to include all interested parties. They typically sought representatives from inside and outside governments. In contrast, a few had narrow profiles (e.g., only municipalities in a watershed could sit on the board), or memberships that were prescribed (e.g., by provincial regulation as is the case for source protection committees in Ontario).
- While many organizations were dependent on government grants for at least part of their funding, combinations of taxation power, endowment funds, and revenue generation opportunities also provided a degree of independent funding. Organizations that were part of systems typically had a higher degree of certainty regarding the source of some of their operating funds.

"Provincial resources are tight so we need to get creative to have money for delivering programs."

Forum participant

The enormous diversity in collaborative, multi-actor organizations makes it extremely difficult to simply duplicate the experiences of others. However, as subsequent stages of the project demonstrated, it is possible to understand and learn from the experiences of other organizations.

COLLABORATIVE, MULTI-ACTOR APPROACHES ARE BETTER SUITED TO SOME SITUATIONS THAN OTHERS

Despite having very diverse backgrounds, the practitioners who participated in this study were able to come to agreement on numerous implementation and design issues. The examples highlighted here emerged from the surveys and during the forum.

- There was a strong consensus among the participants that collaborative, multi-actor approaches are not well suited to situations where there is a lack of accountability, where goals and roles are poorly defined, where the capacity of participants is weak, or where the commitment to collaboration on the part of participants, including governments, is not sincere.
- At the same time, most participants believed that these approaches could work in very challenging situations, for example, where issues were complex, where timelines were long, where participants brought very different kinds of knowledge to the table, and where serious conflicts existed.
- Participants did not view these processes as simply planning or advisory mechanisms. Instead, most accepted a role for collaborative, multi-actor processes in project delivery, policy making, monitoring, and even some kinds of enforcement.
- Despite optimism about the potential effectiveness of collaborative approaches, a common concern expressed during the study related to the "gap" or "disconnect" between these processes and existing government decision making processes. Participants pointed to problems such as poor integration between multi-actor processes and regulatory systems, and governments ignoring the work of these organizations – even when they had mandates from those governments.

GOOD DESIGN IS ESSENTIAL

An important insight that ran through the survey results as an undercurrent, and which came to the fore during deliberations at the forum, was the importance of good design. Enormous investments are made in the design of physical infrastructure such as dams and bridges. Similar investments are rarely made in the design of collaborative processes. As collaboration expert Kirk Emerson observed, "It doesn't work to just get in a room and figure it out". Key design considerations that emerged from this project included the following:

- Collaborative processes inevitably bring together people with different levels and types of education and knowledge. Indigenous, local, and scientific knowledge often intersect. Processes must be designed to be respectful of different kinds of knowledge, and to use them effectively and appropriately at various stages.
- Conflict and disagreement are common in collaborative processes. This is not surprising given that many were created in places where previous efforts to address contentious issues have failed. Successful processes are designed to address conflicts among participants. This often requires skilled facilitators.
- All participants in collaborative processes have interests and needs – and these can be very different. As in the case of conflicts, successful collaborative processes acknowledge that private sector firms have different motives than local residents; that First Nations are not simply "stakeholders" and will expect to be engaged as governments; and that provincial and federal government agencies have constitutional and legal mandates that cannot be ignored.
- Finally, time and again it was emphasized during the project that one-size-fits-all solutions do not exist. Sometimes formal structures and memorandums of agreement are essential, and sometimes they are a barrier. Sometimes multi-actor processes fail because they did not welcome any and all participants, and sometimes they fail because they did. Collaboration is a skill, and good designers of collaborative processes recognize that context matters.

> "If there's no conflict, then there's no collaboration – just take a vote!"
>
> *Kirk Emerson*

WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?

For the foreseeable future, collaborative, multi-actor approaches to governance for water will play important roles in how Canadians address water challenges and opportunities. Water problems are unlikely to become less complex or easier to solve. As a result, the prospects of one agency, organization or group being able to address current and future water challenges and opportunities on its own are not going to improve. This means that collaboration will remain an essential tool in the toolkit. The challenge is to learn how to use these approaches more effectively.

This project confirmed that a deep pool of knowledge and experience exists in Canada among municipalities, federal and provincial/territorial governments, First Nations, industry and agriculture, and environmental and conservation organizations. However, it also offers two major caveats.

- First, using collaborative approaches effectively can be challenging if basic design and implementation concerns are not addressed.
- Second, there are no shortcuts. Learning from the experiences of other organizations is a fruitful strategy, but attempting to duplicate their models is not.

Like any tool, collaboration is not suited to every task, and it is unreasonable to think that everyone automatically knows how to collaborate effectively in multi-actor processes. This project demonstrated clearly that sufficient experience exists in Canada to design effective collaborative, multi-actor processes for water governance. The next challenge is to find ways to harness that experience – and to learn from both successes and failures so that the outcomes are achieved.

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