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Evaluating social learning in England flood risk management: An ‘individual-community interaction’ perspective

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ABSTRACT

Stakeholder participation in environmental management has become widespread globally while the normative benefits of multi-stakeholder processes in governing natural resources are promoted by academics and policy makers. As projections indicate more frequent and intense flood events with future climate change, this article examines one stakeholder participation process within UK flood risk management to evaluate whether it contributes to enhancing effective engagement, through social learning. Evidence is derived from multiple interviews conducted within the England's Regional Flood and Coastal Committees (RFCCs), which were specifically introduced to better integrate local level interests in regional flood defence decision-making. In testing a modified ‘individual-community interaction’ learning framework, it is apparent that personal and group learning outcomes were evident to varying degrees, suggesting that stakeholder participation was relatively successful. However, our analysis suggests that flexibility exists within such structures, allowing reflexive reconstitution to further increase social learning. Recommendations for future stakeholder participation are proposed, providing lessons for both UK flood governance and similar flood risk management processes in other countries.

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1. Introduction

Stakeholder participation in environmental management has become widespread globally (Benson et al., 2013). A defining feature of such participation is that ‘individuals, groups, and/or organisations choose to take an active role in decision making

processes that affect them’ (Reed et al., 2010: 2; Reed, 2008; Newig and Fritsch, 2009) rather than merely providing a consultative role for decision-makers. Multi-stakeholder engagement of this type was first actively promoted in relation to adaptive resource management (Holling, 1978) and is now visible in many countries (Sabatier et al., 2005; Mostert et al., 2007; Koontz, 2014) and in various environmental sectors

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(Wondolleck and Yaffee, 2000; Koontz et al., 2004; Sabatier et al., 2005; Newig and Fritsch, 2009), forming an evolving paradigmatic shift in environmental governance (Benson et al., 2013). While employed in many different environmental management contexts, these forms of social interaction are closely associated with integrated forms of water resource management at multiple scales (Benson et al., 2013; Gain et al., 2013; Newig and Koontz, 2014; Newig et al., 2014). Multiple institutional forms facilitating stakeholder engagement are documented, ranging along a continuum from centralised agency bodies to more networked, local forms of ‘partnership’ (Moore and Koontz, 2003; Sabatier et al., 2005; Margerum, 2008; Benson et al., 2013). Despite this shift in governing and the rise of stakeholder participation as a governance approach, the actual benefits remain uncertain – thereby resulting in attempts at evaluating effectiveness (Benson et al., 2014).

A multitude of studies have evaluated the success of stakeholder participation in environmental management, with various criteria employed (e.g. Lubell, 2005; Leach and Sabatier, 2005; Koontz and Thomas, 2006; Özerol and Newig, 2008; Biddle and Koontz, 2014). In their review of this literature, Carr et al. (2012: 3) helpfully distinguish three main evaluation methods for measuring effective stakeholder participation: what they term ‘process’ evaluations employing criteria such as accountability, cost-effectiveness, knowledge inclusion and power; ‘intermediary outcome’ evaluations that focus on the enhancement of social capital, through networking and the enhancement of trust, and the development of process ‘products’ such as agreements and knowledge sharing; and ‘resource management outcomes’ evaluations using indicators such as environmental, health or economic improvements. Another widely employed evaluative indicator of the effectiveness of stakeholder participation is social learning, with an increasing variety of approaches now evident.

Stakeholder participation resulting in social learning is ‘increasingly becoming a normative goal in natural resource management’ (Reed et al., 2010: 1; see also Muro and Jeffrey, 2008), while also a measurable outcome of such processes. Such learning is considered desirable for several reasons. For example, Koontz (2014: 1573) suggests that, through ‘deliberation [or careful consideration], stakeholders with different perspectives and information can learn from each other as they develop a shared vision and plan’. Stakeholder participation is now promoted to enhance decision-making (e.g. Thorne, 2014) and provide mechanisms for continual learning on implementing adaptive management cycles that address complexity and uncertainty through incremental adjustment (Pahl-Wostl et al., 2007). Allied benefits from social learning might also include the legitimacy or ‘buy-in’ of governance solutions, for example increasing trust and reciprocity between stakeholders, particularly local non-state actors (Smith et al., 2015). Several studies have consequently cited the role of social learning in enhancing climate adaptation, with Collins and Ison (2009: 359) calling it a ‘new policy and practice paradigm’. However, as Reed et al. (2010) argue, the lack of agreement over what constitutes social learning amongst scholars means that while there are:

‘... numerous examples of supposed social learning projects that simply facilitated stakeholder participation;

there is rarely any evidence that social learning occurred or any explicit attempt to measure social learning ...’ (ibid.: 2)

Although some studies have since sought to redress this deficit (see Koontz, 2014), a critical empirical research question for stakeholder participation in environmental management is still to *what extent do such processes actually lead to social learning?*

We focus on social learning as an indicator of stakeholder participation effectiveness in one critical area of environmental governance, namely Flood Risk Management (FRM). As in many European countries, UK flood control has become increasingly politically, economically and socially significant; particularly in response to successive devastating floods since 2007 (e.g. Thorne, 2014; Lorenzoni et al., 2015). Conflicts have emerged over how flood defence investments are decided and the extent to which they reflect local preferences. Under the UK Government’s Localism Act 2011, lead local flood authorities such as local governments must ‘review and scrutinise the exercise by risk management authorities of both flood risk management functions and coastal erosion risk management functions which may affect the local authority’s area’ (UK Government, 2011). One government response has been to promote more local level participation in central flood protection investment decision-making in England and Wales via Regional Flood and Coastal Committees (RFCCs) (Lorenzoni et al., 2015). The RFCCs were introduced in 2011; their remit mandates the involvement of governmental and non-governmental actors, including elected public representatives, in determining funding decisions. Of interest, therefore, is the extent to which social learning occurs as a relative measure of the effectiveness of participation in Committees within wider national FRM.

Section 2 outlines approaches to defining and evaluating social learning, and developing an analytical framework that underpins our analysis. Stakeholder participation approaches in the RFCCs are examined in Section 3 to provide a national overview. A brief historical context on the evolution of the Committees is then provided, in addition to an outline of current developments. Section 4 outlines the research methods, with a focus on in-depth case study investigations from the South West and Anglian (Eastern) RFCCs. Results are presented in Section 5 and discussed in relation to stakeholder participation effectiveness. Recommendations on improving current practice to enhance social learning and areas of future research are then proposed.

2. Defining social learning

A significant impediment to comparative political analysis is the constant expansion of concepts (‘conceptual stretching’) such ‘that our gains in extensional coverage tend to be matched by losses in connotative precision’, thereby preventing the cross-national ‘travelling’ of theory (Sartori, 1970: 1034–5). Sartori hence prescribes more rigorous application of tightly defined concepts that guide empirical and theoretical investigations, allowing effective comparative theory application (ibid.). It is apparent that the literature on social learning is far from achieving this aim.

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