



A table for five: Stakeholder perceptions of water governance in Alberta



Jenna Montgomery^a, Wei Xu^{a,*}, Henning Bjornlund^b, Jane Edwards^b

^a Department of Geography, University of Lethbridge, Canada

^b School of Commerce, University of South Australia, Australia

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ABSTRACT

By the 1990s, the issue of sustainable management of water had become a global priority. By the end of the decade, the UN promoted the development of the Integrated Water Resource Management (IWRM) framework to assist governments in reaching water sustainability goals. With IWRM being the accepted method of managing water, traditional government led top-down management was observed to be insufficient to meet the demands of diverse stakeholders, inspiring a transition from government to governance. This transition emphasized inclusiveness, as well as active stakeholder participation in identifying problems and solutions. While governance has been readily adopted around the world, it has not been consistently defined, resulting in diverse understandings and applications that have focused on individual aspects such as economics or social justice, and making evaluations of governance systems difficult. To serve as criteria for evaluations, five pillars of good governance have been drawn from a systematic review of peer-reviewed and grey literature. These five pillars are then used to better understand and evaluate water governance under Alberta's *Water for Life* (WFL) strategy; a water governance system that has been operational for over a decade. The evaluation is conducted using the Q-method to qualitatively and quantitatively identify distinct perspectives within the stakeholder population. Five perspectives emerged from the data, each reflecting unique values, priorities, and interests related to the water governance process and the five pillars of good governance. These perspectives provide insight into how each of these pillars operate in practice under WFL, and how they can be improved to enhance good governance.

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1. Introduction

Water supply is finite and increasingly uncertain given the likely impacts of climate change and an increased demand for water as population increases, and agricultural and industrial activity expands (Bjornlund et al., 2013). Concerns are also escalating about water quality and the health of riparian ecosystems (United Nations, 1987). These pressures have made sustainability central to water management and in 1992 the UN adopted the Dublin Principles, which continues to serve as a guide for developing sustainable water management (Solanes and Gonzalez-Villarreal, 1999). Informed by the Dublin Principle, the Integrated Water Resources Management (IWRM) framework has had a significant impetus on the global development of governance in water management (Agarwal et al., 2000; Ako et al., 2009; Charnay, 2011).

While governance has been widely adopted, its components have not been identified with sufficient clarity to allow for a consistent understanding of governance. While a general conceptualization of governance is available, there is little guidance on the operational and evaluative components of a governance system. With IWRM as the default template, governance has become a tool rather than a participatory and collaborative process for reaching outcomes (Castro, 2007; Lautze et al., 2011). Literature also relates the emergence of governance as a response to societal pressure and unwillingness by the state to relinquish decision-making power, or a shift to neoliberalism and a decentralised approach that uproots the traditional state level command-and-control methods (Kjaer, 2010; Loughlin, 2009; Wallis and Ison, 2011). However, this is challenged by a recognition that the state has a role to play in environmental management as the decision-making power (Duit, 2016; Lee, 2014). Based on peer-reviewed and grey literature, this paper proposes five pillars of good governance that recognize governance as a process, rather than a tool, and demonstrates how those pillars can serve as evaluative criteria.

* Corresponding author.

E-mail address: wei.xu@uleth.ca (W. Xu).

These pillars are then applied to evaluate the governance processes involved in the Alberta's *Water For Life* (WFL) strategy, a governance system instituted in 2004 (Government of Alberta, 2005). Alberta was considered an ideal context within which to evaluate governance as it experiences many of the dilemmas of contemporary water management and has a relatively long history of transitioning from government to governance. The Q-method was used to qualitatively and quantitatively uncover stakeholder perspectives of the current water governance system in Alberta and their satisfaction with how the five pillars are being integrated and expressed. Stakeholders' satisfaction with governance processes are critical to the success and effectiveness of any governance process. From the data, five unique perspectives were identified. These results provide insight into where the existing governance process can be improved.

2. Literature review

The transition from government to governance is the result of globalism and the emergence of Neoliberalism, which has challenged the post-World War II era of centralized control and decision-making (Loughlin, 2009). Neoliberalism in particular has undermined the notion of the top-down, interventionist state that was the template for command-and-control approaches to water management. This shift favours deregulation, privatization and decentralization. With decentralization came the development of systems that allow greater citizen participation in decision-making such as IWRM, which promotes a participatory approach to decision-making that devolves some power and authority from the government to public stakeholders. While this transition has been widely implemented around the world, the literature review identified a need for a consistent and comprehensive understanding of governance and good governance for implementation and evaluation of the governance process. To support consistency, five pillars of good governance were extracted from the literature to categorize and simplify the characteristics of an effective governance system.

2.1. Governance

The move to adopt governance around the globe was hasty and lacked consistency (Lautze et al., 2011). Consequently, there has been no standard or commonly accepted definition of governance and few guidelines for governance practices, processes and institutions (Rogers and Hall 2003). Due to differing contexts, existing definitions of governance are diverse in their orientation and emphasis and lack consistency and insight into operation and implementation. However, it can be said that governance encompasses both the institutions and the process of decision-making (Lautze et al., 2011). Table 1 reveals a number of definitions that include Kaufmann's (1999) definition that focuses on democracy and economics, a definition that was used by the United Nations Development Programme (1997) that highlights elements related to freedom and justice. None of these definitions are incorrect nor is the list exhaustive in its scope; they merely highlight different dimensions of governance. Nevertheless, without a common definition of governance it is difficult to see how it can be effectively implemented and, just as importantly, evaluated (Castro 2007; Lautze et al., 2011; Pahl-Wostl and Krantz, 2010; Tortajada, 2010).

For the purpose of this paper, water governance will be defined as:

“...the processes and institutions by which decisions affecting water are made. It does not include practical, technical and routine management functions such as modelling, forecasting, staffing and constructing infrastructure. It does not include water resource outcomes (Lautze et al., 2011).”

This definition is used based on a literature review of governance because it offers clarity about what governance includes and excludes providing a solid framework upon which an evaluation can occur. It emphasizes that governance is the processes and institutions, not the outcomes and reinforces the significance stakeholders and participants play in the decision-making process.

2.2. Good governance

Evaluations of governance systems typically evaluate it in terms of good governance. However, much like governance, there is a lack of consistency in how good governance is defined. Previous attempts to conceptualize and evaluate governance have relied on IWRM as a framework (Lautze et al., 2011; Ako et al., 2009; Charnay, 2011; Hammer et al., 2011). When governance is understood within the IWRM framework, it is regarded as a tool to achieve specific outcomes (Castro, 2007; Lautze et al., 2011; Connick and Innes, 2003). From this perspective, a good outcome is a signifier of good governance. However, this neglects the role collaboration and participation play in reaching outcomes, which are essential to resolving water management issues (Biswas and Tortajada, 2010; Castro, 2007; De Stefano, 2010; Lautze et al., 2011). Effective governance or good governance needs to create structures and processes that allow for equitable negotiation between stakeholders. While there is no universally accepted understanding of what good governance is, the literature can be distilled into pillars, or components, that promote good governance. The pillars selected reflect the definition of governance as stated above and do not attempt to describe good governance in universal terms.

2.2.1. The five pillars of good governance

While governance is almost by definition unique to its context, this article proposes five principles or pillars that are integral to good governance. They are the result of extracting and distilling the material gathered in a systematic review of peer-reviewed and grey literature on governance from the perspective of governance as a process. These pillars reflect on the structures and processes characterizing good governance and include accountability, adaptability, participation, rule of law, and transparency. The elements listed below are simplified to reflect common aspects described in the literature and are not exhaustive.

2.2.1.1. Accountability. This centres on how well formal structures facilitate outcomes. It ensures that each element of the governance system is working effectively, by:

- specifying roles and responsibilities (Lockwood et al., 2010; de Løe et al., 2009);
- identifying needed skills and resources (de Løe et al., 2009);
- improving coordination and collaboration (de Løe et al., 2009);
- ensuring checks and balances mitigate the abuse of power (Taylor and de Løe, 2012; de Løe et al., 2009);
- transparently designating authority (Lockwood et al., 2010);
- incorporating science and local knowledge (Taylor and de Løe, 2012; Rogers and Hall, 2003), and
- balancing power and priorities (Taylor and de Løe, 2012; Rogers and Hall, 2003).

2.2.1.2. Adaptability. This refers to how well governance systems respond to uncertainty and change (de Løe et al., 2009). It entails:

- responding to new information (Lockwood et al., 2010);
- anticipating and managing threats, opportunities and risks;
- systematic reflection on individual, organizational and system performance (Lockwood et al., 2010);

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