



## Analysis

# Incorporating Outcomes from Collaborative Processes into Government Decision Making: A Case Study from Low Water Response Planning in Ontario, Canada



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## ABSTRACT

Collaborative approaches are increasingly being used by governments in western countries to address complex environmental policy problems. These approaches often bring together diverse actors in settings that allow for joint problem solving. However, the effectiveness of collaboration can be undermined if governments choose to ignore the outcomes of collaboration in their decision making processes. In this paper we report findings from a study of a drought-based collaborative process. We evaluate the extent to which the provincial government in Ontario, Canada, used recommendations from collaborative groups in its Low Water Response program. Interviews, document analysis and personal observations provided the data for a qualitative, multi-case study analysis. Three cases were chosen where collaborative teams made decisions designed to balance ecological and economic water issues during drought. The Institutional Analysis and Development framework provided a conceptual foundation for evaluating the extent to which collaborative outcomes were used by government. Even though the provincial government did not accept the most important decision made by collaborative teams (to declare severe drought), participants were generally satisfied with outcomes achieved through collaboration, especially social and environmental outcomes. Challenges revealed through the study included insufficient capacity, lack of clear program requirements, and issues inherent with low water.

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## 1. Introduction

Conventional government policy development processes may offer few opportunities for members of the public to be involved in internal debates about the merits of various science-based, technical approaches to protecting the environment (Watson et al., 2009). Instead, members of the public and other stakeholders simply may be consulted on what was decided once these processes are complete (Benson et al., 2013). This type of process is not necessarily well suited to addressing complex social, environmental and economic concerns (Head, 2010), especially at the local scale (Diaz-Kope and Miller-Stevens, 2015). Science-based and technical solutions are necessary for addressing contemporary environmental challenges, but on their own these often are not sufficient (Armitage et al., 2012). As a result, different kinds of collaborative processes that make room for local knowledge and individual action increasingly are being used (Taylor and de Loë, 2012).

Collaborative processes became popular in the 1980's in the United States as a way to address a range of environmental planning and management issues (Ryan and Bidwell, 2007; Koontz and Newig, 2014).

Real-world collaborative processes take many forms, and operate at a host of scales and levels (Margerum, 2008). They differ in important respects from other ways in which non-government actors can participate in policy making processes, such as workshops, expert panels, or consultation processes (Koontz and Newig, 2014). In contrast to these approaches, collaboration typically aims to engage relevant actors early in the process to help define problems and create solutions on which participants can agree. More fundamentally, collaborative approaches usually encourage sharing resources and knowledge between multiple actors to build working relationships and to collectively confront mutual challenges (Gray, 1985). This takes the relationship between government actors and citizens far beyond the level of “informing” that is more characteristic of public participation.

Proponents argue that collaborative processes can improve democratic participation, build social equity and provide local knowledge for decision-making (Meyer and Konisky, 2007; Margerum, 2011). Importantly, in our view collaborative processes should be viewed, from an analytical perspective, as different from related processes such as “co-management”. For example, co-management tends to involve joint decision-making and power sharing between state actors and local resource users, often Indigenous peoples; it is common in resource management situations (Carlsson and Berkes, 2005; Plummer and Armitage, 2007). Co-management unquestionably shares many features with

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collaboration, but is sufficiently distinct that we do not conflate it with collaboration in this paper.

Collaboration can take many forms, from locally-organized, grass-roots processes, to institutionalized, government-created processes established through legislation or policy (Margerum, 2008; Diaz-Kope and Miller-Stevens, 2015). Our concern is with government-led collaboration, which we define as “a governance arrangement where one or more public agencies directly engage non-state stakeholders in a collective decision-making process that is formal, consensus-oriented, and deliberative and that aims to make or implement public policy or manage public programs or assets” (Ansell and Gash, 2007, p. 544).

Reasons why governments establish collaborative processes are varied. Some analysts argue that they are well suited to situations where problems are complex and uncertainty is high (Moore and Koontz, 2003). Others have argued that governments may use collaborative processes as a way to direct attention away from the fact that they themselves lack the capacity to address intractable problems (McClosky, 2000). Regardless of the rationale, contemporary water governance in countries around the world now often involves some kinds of collaborative processes at various stages of planning and decision-making.

Growing use of collaboration raises important questions about the appropriate balance between collaborative and conventional approaches to governing given that collaborative groups usually do not have access to regulatory tools for ensuring compliance, and thus rely on the authority of the state to enforce decisions (Koontz and Newig, 2014). Collaborative processes established by governments frequently are expected to produce decisions or recommendations. Hence, it is reasonable to ask whether or not participants should assume that governments are obliged to follow those decisions or to implement those recommendations (McClosky, 2000). At the same time, it is necessary to consider the implications for collaborative processes of governments not taking their decisions and recommendations into account. When governments ignore the decisions and recommendations produced by collaborative processes they established, participants can become frustrated and disillusioned (Kallis et al., 2009; Richie et al., 2012; Dutterer and Margerum, 2015). This is particularly true in cases where governments ultimately made decisions based on lobbying or elite-level access by actors who circumvented the collaborative process (Clare et al., 2013). In these circumstances, participants can conclude that governments entered into collaboration unfaithfully. This can result in disillusionment on the part of participants, and can make implementation of the decisions a government ultimately made much more difficult – especially if participants believe that the government's decision was inferior to the recommendations reached collaboratively.

In this paper, we investigate the relationship between outcomes of collaborative processes created by governments and government decision-making processes to which these collaborative processes are linked. We focus specifically on whether or not governments are incorporating the outcomes of collaborative processes they created into government policy and program decisions. A multi-case study of drought response in Ontario provides the empirical setting for the investigation. Ontario Low Water Response is a drought response program that uses watershed-based, collaborative teams to address local impacts of low water. These teams make decisions that are meant to inform government decision-making during emergency conditions. The program was developed in response to acknowledged weaknesses in the provincial water allocation system (the Permit to Take Water program or PTTW). Decisions made by collaborative teams under Low Water Response are meant to integrate seamlessly with the PTTW. Thus, this real world example provides an ideal setting for exploring whether or not government-created collaborative processes can interface effectively with traditional government decision-making process.

## 2. Evaluating Collaborative Outcomes

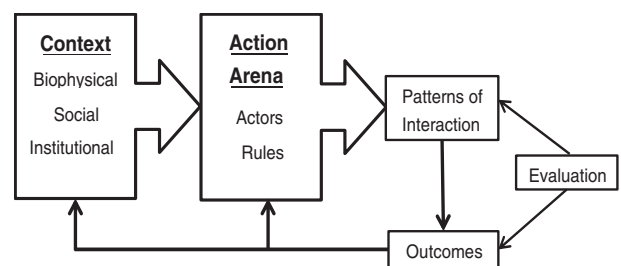
Successful collaboration at the watershed scale demands careful institutional design (Imperial, 1999; Ananda and Proctor, 2013). In this context, institutional design is “the basic protocols and ground rules for collaboration, which are critical for the procedural legitimacy of the collaborative process” (Ansell and Gash, 2007, p. 555). The Institutional Analysis and Development Framework (IAD) provides a proven basis for analyzing the relationship between outcomes of collaborative processes created by governments and linked government decision-making processes (Imperial and Yandle, 2005; Koontz, 2005).

The IAD framework (Fig. 1) has been used for over 30 years to investigate questions relating to the design and effectiveness of institutions for environmental governance. Contextual variables, how decisions are made, and outcome evaluation are at the core of the framework (Kiser and Ostrom, 1982). Attention to the ways in which outcomes are shaped at various institutional levels, which are referred to as constitutional, collective and operational, has encouraged wide spread use of the framework. The concept of the “action arena” is central in the IAD framework. Decisions are made within the action arena through institutional ‘rules’ that specify who makes decisions, how decisions are made (mechanisms), and the tradeoffs between decisions (Ostrom, 2005). The context and rules in the action arena influence the patterns of interaction, which outline the relations between actors involved in decision-making (Imperial, 1999).

The IAD framework has been adapted to fit specific circumstances. For example, the many authors who have used the IAD framework to analyze water-related action situations have added and subtracted elements and modified the rules to suit their needs (e.g., Leach and Pelkey, 2001; Lubell et al., 2002; Cowie and Borrett, 2005; Gerlak and Heikkila, 2006; Kauneckis and Imperial, 2007; Hardy and Koontz, 2009; Ananda and Proctor, 2013; de Loë and Morris, 2014). Table 1 presents the rules as used in this research. This is a mainstream perspective relative to other studies cited here.

An important strength of the IAD framework is its focus on outcomes – or what actually happens as a result of decisions that are made (Fig. 1). The framework emphasizes that if outcomes do not meet objectives or address goals, then the ‘rules’ that define allowable actions (Table 1) can or will be adjusted. These adjustments can take place at various levels. For example, in cases where the actors involved have self-organized, they can deliberate and negotiate new rules. However, rules can also be shaped at the ‘constitutional’ level. An example of such a rule change would be a court decision that gives new powers to a formerly marginalized actor.

Identifying appropriate indicators to measure outcomes and determine ‘success’ in collaborative approaches is challenging (Koontz and Thomas, 2006; McGuire, 2006). Collaborative outcomes can be considered “the effects of the collaborative process and its outputs on changing social and environmental conditions” (Mandarano, 2008, p. 457). Where collaborative outputs are the tangible products that are created by collaborative processes, such as management plans, outcomes include less tangible effects such as improved relationships and increased



Adapted from (Ostrom, 2011)

Fig. 1. IAD Framework. Adapted from (Ostrom, 2011).

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