



Analysis

Structuring stakeholder participation in New Zealand's water resource governance

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ABSTRACT

International experience has shown that extensive, systematic and structured stakeholder engagement is important in modern water resource governance. Through two case studies in the Canterbury Region, we investigate the emergence of structured and deliberative participatory processes for decision-making in New Zealand. We particularly focus on the use of evaluative criteria and weightings in providing structure for stakeholder deliberations and clarity and transparency in decision-making processes. Some of the benefits of using criteria weightings to reflect individuals' priorities include their ability to bring out the various perspectives and preferences to start the deliberations and increase the understanding of other people's points of views and their knowledge to all of the stakeholders. We consider particular aspects of the New Zealand context, including the development of criteria specific to Maori interests. These case studies lead us to conclude that stakeholder participation in decision-making is beneficial and increasingly necessary to resolve the problems and tensions around the governance of Canterbury's water resources. They also demonstrate that there are numerous practical and systemic barriers that must be overcome if the potential is to be fully realised. We provide recommendations on how such participatory processes can be successfully implemented to produce meaningful and effective outcomes.

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1. Introduction

The sustainable management of freshwater resources is an increasingly important issue in New Zealand (Harding et al., 2004), as in many other countries (e.g. Australia (CSIRO, 2008) and Germany (Mauser et al., 2008)). In many cases, current systems of water resource governance have failed to cope with increasing demands of quantity and quality on water systems, and new solutions are being sought. Such solutions are likely to require a shift from the conventional hierarchical models of water governance focusing on regulatory controls, to hybrid governance models in which collaborative, market-based and regulatory elements all play a role (Gunningham, 2008). One element that is clearly emerging in New Zealand is a greater role for stakeholder participation in decision-making (Russell and Frame, accepted for publication). This ranges from involvement in specific water resource infrastructure developments, to development of catchment and regional plans, and even to the redesign of water governance institutions. Our focus in this paper is on approaches to structuring stakeholder involvement, and particularly, the use of multiple evaluative criteria to assess alternative options for water management. We consider two case studies in the Canterbury Region of New Zealand, where problems of

water governance have become contested and severe (Smith, 2010) (Fig. 1).

Decisions concerning management of water resources often involve complex and uncertain (sometimes disputed) scientific, social and cultural facts, multiple (sometimes conflicting) values of individual and different stakeholders, and high stakes. Engaging stakeholders meaningfully and constructively in making such decisions is not easy. In Canterbury, these difficulties are multiplied by the misunderstanding and polarisation of stakeholders' positions and mistrust (between not only different stakeholder groups but also between agencies with responsibility for water management) that are the legacy of inadequate water governance (Gunningham, 2008). Various criteria can be identified to effectively assess alternative options available to decision-makers. These evaluative criteria can then be used to bring structure to decision problems, to identify important values and data/knowledge relevant to these, and to clarify stakeholders' different value positions (as stakeholders may consider some criteria more important in assessing options than others and these rankings may differ between stakeholders). This general approach to structuring stakeholder participation – including but not limited to the use of formal multicriteria decision tools (Proctor, 2009) – may be useful in a wide range of decision problems that can be framed in terms of choices between alternative options and by extension, development, adaptation and refinement of such options.

Through a case study approach, we seek to understand how evaluative criteria may be applied to aid stakeholder participation in

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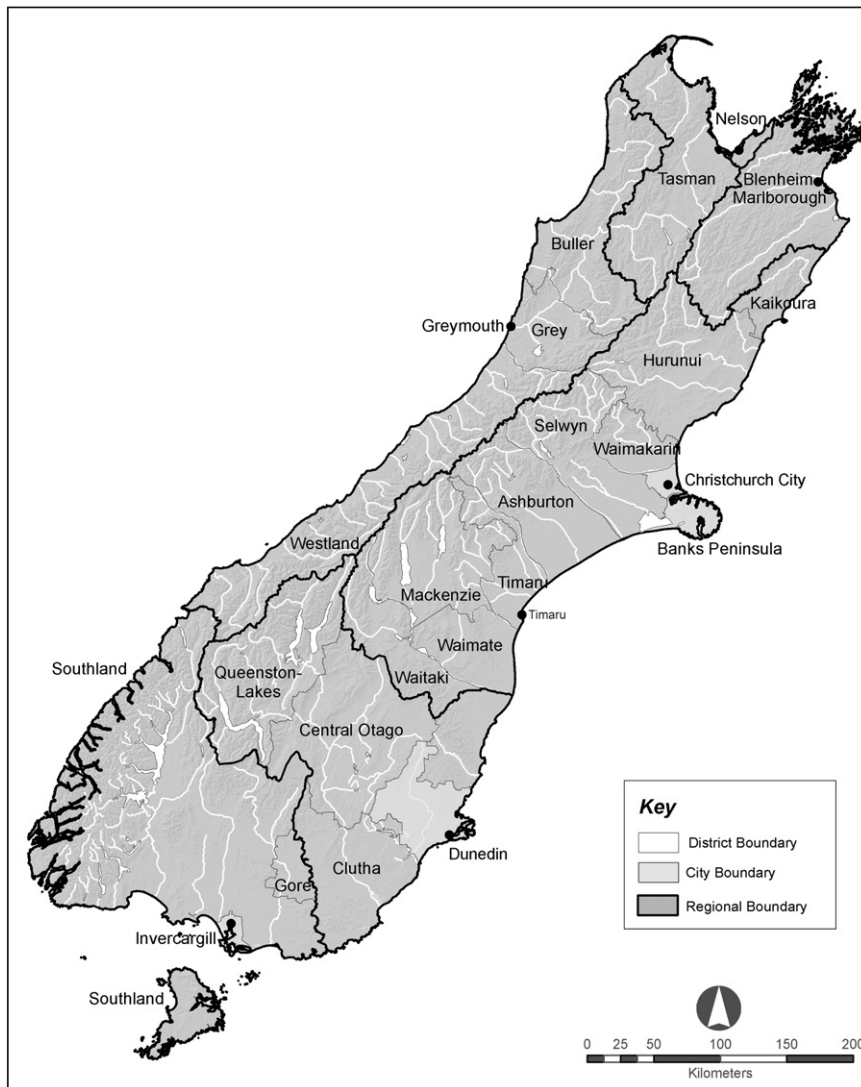


Fig. 1. Map of New Zealand's South Island showing political boundaries, topography and rivers.

decision-making for management of water resources in New Zealand. Following earlier developments elsewhere – e.g. in Europe (Munda, 2005) and Australia (Tan et al., 2008) – multicriteria approaches are now attracting attention in New Zealand. While we focus strongly on the particular characteristics of water resource governance problems in Canterbury and on specific features of the two cases, we also consider more general implications within and beyond the New Zealand context where possible; for example, regarding the use of evaluative criteria at the early stage of framing decision processes in terms of prospective options. The outcomes of the case studies and the conclusions drawn provide significant implications, not only for water governance in New Zealand, but also in other countries around the world where similar difficult decisions arise involving trade-offs between economic, social and ecological objectives, and a multiplicity of stakeholder interests.

The paper is structured as follows. Section 2 provides the context for our research, giving an overview of developments in New Zealand's freshwater governance since the introduction of the Resource Management Act (RMA) in 1991. Limitations of current governance systems have created formidable challenges and an increased emphasis on collaborative governance and participatory

decision-making is widely seen as being essential to address these.¹ In Section 2, we firstly describe moves towards greater participation in other jurisdictions, and secondly, describe how an iterative and interactive process known as Deliberative Multicriteria Evaluation (DMCE) has been applied in Australia to facilitate and structure participatory decision-making. Section 4 then presents two recent cases in Canterbury in which multiple evaluative criteria have been used to structure participatory processes. Wider implications of these experiences are discussed in Section 5, and in Section 6 we present our conclusions and recommendations.

¹ In the Proposed Officials Work Programme of the New Start for Freshwater, items 58 and 59 address consensus-building and participation respectively (<http://www.mfe.govt.nz/cabinet-papers/implementing-new-start-for-fresh-water.html>). The Canterbury Water Management Strategy (2009a, p57) states that an "integrated approach to managing water resources across the region" will provide *inter alia*, "opportunities for those affected by rules to participate in formulating them".

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