



The role of public participation in encouraging changes in rural land use to reduce flood risk



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ABSTRACT

Changes in rural land use to reduce flood risk are encouraged by governments in many countries, but they may face considerable opposition by land managers. Local participative processes are thought to help overcome opposition. This article presents an evaluation of an intensive participative process set up between land managers and governmental agencies following two severe floods in the transboundary Bowmont–Glen catchment in Scotland and England. A combination of interviews and documentary analysis is used. The research demonstrates that the participative process contributed to greater uptake of rural land use change and improved compliance with existing environmental policies. There were nevertheless low levels of social learning amongst participants. Two institutional designs for improving policy implementation are presented.

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Introduction

The role of rural land management in reducing flood risk has attracted considerable policy and academic attention worldwide (Alphen and Lodder, 2006; Grabs et al., 2007; Shrubsole, 2007; Everard et al., 2009; WMO, 2009). Measures such as wetland restoration, afforestation or less intensive agricultural practices may provide means of slowing and storing water run-off, as well as providing other ecosystem services, such as improvements in water quality, increased biodiversity or greater resilience to climate change impacts (Wheater and Evans, 2009). The national policy framework in Scotland now encourages the uptake of rural land management measures (Spray et al., 2010; Rouillard et al., 2012), as part of European-wide reforms of flood risk management (EU Floods Directive), water resources (EU Water Framework Directive) and, to some extent, rural development funding (EU Common Agriculture Policy). Implementation of these measures nevertheless faces many challenges, partly due to the limited empirical evidence of the effectiveness of rural land management in reducing flood risk (Wilby et al., 2008), but also due to their socio-economic impacts, particularly on agricultural businesses (Kenyon et al., 2008; Posthumus et al., 2008).

To facilitate policy implementation, scholarship on flood risk management (Alphen and Lodder, 2006; Werritty, 2006; Grabs et al., 2007; Shrubsole, 2007; Everard et al., 2009) and Integrated

Water Resource Management (GWP, 2000; Hooper, 2003; Biswas, 2004) commonly calls for wide public participation, i.e. the involvement of societal actors, such as local communities, in public decision-making. Public participation is deemed to improve not only the quality of policies, but also to help adapt policies to local contexts and preferences, and increase their uptake (Considine, 2004; Hill and Hupe, 2009). Public participation is now enshrined in key European policies relevant to flood risk management, such as EU Floods Directive (2007/60/EC), EU Water Framework Directive (2000/60/EC) or indeed the Aarhus Convention on Access to Information, Public Participation in Decision-making and Access to Justice in Environmental Matters. However, public participation has been criticised on various ground, in particular for lacking evidence and guidance on best practice (see e.g. Cooke and Kothari, 2001; Innes and Booher, 2004; Reed, 2008; Carr et al., 2012).

In parallel, scholarship on social learning in natural resource management claims that the transition towards a sustainable society should be underpinned not only by involving the public in decision-making, but also by fostering some form of learning through collective engagement and reflection (Parson and Clark, 1995; Keen et al., 2005; Ison et al., 2007; Collins and Ison, 2009). The importance of social learning is particularly emphasised in the literature on how to increase societal resilience to climate change impacts on the water cycle (Folke et al., 2005; Pahl-Wostl et al., 2008; Huitema et al., 2009). Nevertheless, little consensus exist on what factors are conducive to it, and how it is related to public participation (see e.g. Collins and Ison, 2009; Reed et al., 2010; Muro and Jeffrey, 2012; Bos et al., 2013).

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This paper presents an empirical examination of factors enabling and constraining stakeholder participation and social learning in water resource management. It evaluates an intensive programme of exchange between land managers and governmental agencies set up in the aftermath of two severe floods and which resulted in the development of the transboundary Bowmont–Glen catchment management plan between Scotland and England. The paper first draws on the literature to examine the relationship between public participation and social learning in natural resource management (see section “Public participation and social learning in natural resource management”). This provides the theoretical framework for the research empirical context and methods (see sections “The Bowmont–Glen Catchment Management Plan” and “Materials and methods”). Research results are then presented (see section “Views of participants”) before factors conducive to public policy implementation and adaptive governance are identified (see section “How successful has the Bowmont–Glen participative process been?”) and implications for better governance are outlined in the Conclusion (see section “Conclusion”).

Public participation and social learning in natural resource management

This section briefly presents the key concepts underpinning this research, first discussing public participation, then contrasting it with the related but separate concept of social learning. Public participation has been a field of much research interest in natural resource management over the last 40 years, and was seen as a mean to reduce disputes arising from controversial governmental decisions. Blackstock and Richards (2007) identify three common justifications for using public participation in natural resource management. First, public participation leads to more legitimate and fair decisions since it offers a chance for those who are going to be impacted by the decision to expose their preferences and needs. Second, public participation improves decision-making in substantive terms because lay and local knowledge may complement expert and bureaucratic knowledge. Third, decision-making may be more effective because participation may increase trust and acceptability of the final decision.

Several reviews in on public participation in natural resource management conclude that there exists little evidence for supporting the above claims, and argue that public participation may lead to opposite outcomes by causing anger, increasing social distrust, and reinforcing privileges (Cooke and Kothari, 2001; Innes and Booher, 2004; Reed, 2008). In water management, as in many other natural resource areas, public authorities started to use public participation in the 1970s, but, to date, the majority of interactions have been based around consultations and public meetings (Delli Priscoli, 2009). Consequently, the potential of other methods to improve decision-making, such as citizen juries where participants are in theory more engaged and empowered, has been investigated (see e.g. Fiorino, 1990; Rowe and Frewer, 2000; Innes and Booher, 2004). The assumption was that moving up “Arnstein’s ladder of participation” (Arnstein, 1969), which classifies participative processes on the degree to which stakeholders are engaged in decision-making, would bring positive outcomes. The extreme ends of the ladder range from citizens only being informed of decisions through to citizens having co-decision power. Recent reviews on public participation support a balanced approach in which participative processes should be tailored to, and agreed by, stakeholders, and should be underpinned by skilled facilitation in a process that promotes empowerment, equity, and integration of knowledge (Reed, 2008; Carr et al., 2012).

While public participation has received much academic attention early on, social learning has come to play an important role

in shaping discourses in natural resource management over the last 20 years, although the concept still entails multiple meanings and definitions (Parson and Clark, 1995; Keen et al., 2005; Muro and Jeffrey, 2008; Reed et al., 2010; Cundill and Rodela, 2012; Ison et al., 2013). For Reed et al. (2010), social learning is primarily associated with the outcome of cognitive enhancement whereby individuals acquire new knowledge and facts, for example an improved understanding of the implications of certain practices or policies in natural resource management. Two other potential outcomes of learning are commonly emphasised in the literature (Bull et al., 2008; Huitema et al., 2010; Muro and Jeffrey, 2012). Communicative learning occurs when individuals improve their ability to examine and reinterpret the intentions and values of other individuals, and increase their capacity to collaborate with others, epitomised for example by an increased willingness to exchange and debate. Normative learning happens when individuals change their values and norms, for example when stakeholders develop an enhanced feeling of responsibility towards society.

In contrast to the above which focus on learning as an outcome, Collins and Ison (2009) emphasise social learning as a process associated with one or more of the following: (i) a convergence of goals, criteria and knowledge leading to awareness of mutual expectations and the building of relational capital, (ii) the co-creation of knowledge which provides insight into causes of and means required to transform a situation, and (iii) a change of behaviours and actions resulting from understanding something through action and leading to concerted action. As such, social learning is an emergent property of the processes transforming social-ecological systems (Collins and Ison, 2009).

The relationship between social learning and public participation is an on-going topic of debate. For some (e.g. Mostert et al., 2007; Reed et al., 2010; Evely et al., 2011; Muro and Jeffrey, 2012), public participation may not automatically lead to social learning, but can provide a supportive ground if it promotes high levels of engagement. Mostert et al. (2007) lists a number of factors for promoting social learning in water management that are similar to those identified for public participation by Reed (2008). In addition, Mostert et al. (2007) emphasise that participants should be committed to re-frame their views and should have opportunities, resources and access to institutions to put into practice learning outcomes.

For other researchers (Ison et al., 2007; Collins and Ison, 2009), Arnstein’s ladder of public participation puts too much emphasis on the re-distribution of social power and cannot therefore be reconciled with the objectives and processes of social learning. In their view, social learning occurs when it is pursued purposefully as the central objective of a collective process in which participants are encouraged to question “epistemologies”, that is to question their own and other participants’ beliefs and values. They stress the following enabling or constraining factors for social learning: considering the context of the issue at stake (i.e. appreciating past causes of current understanding and practices), developing conducive institutions and policies, debating epistemology (i.e. jointly identifying what constitutes improvement and co-producing knowledge in action), building “stakeholding” (in particular creating joint responsibility), and identifying and providing adequate facilitation.

This paper explores empirically the above conceptualisations and different perspectives on public participation and social learning. The case selected is the development of a Catchment Management Plan (CMP) in which a community of local land managers interacted closely with local governmental representatives. The CMP was a voluntary initiative by local actors with the aim to foster dialogue and identify a roadmap for the sustainable management of the catchment. The reasons for participating, the methods and objectives of participation, attitudes of participants towards

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