

Collaborative governance for wicked NRM problems: recognising diverse forms of multi-level arrangements

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This paper contributes to the theory and practice of collaboration in natural resource management (NRM). The international research literature demonstrates that collaborations are widely believed to assist in building pathways that are not open to more traditional top-down problem-solving. They are thus a valuable strategy in adaptive governance, which is recognised as a key attribute in the literature on resilient social-ecological systems.

In NRM policies and programs, collaborative approaches have been seen to have positive outcomes: e.g., helped define important complex problems that have eluded past efforts; set agendas and focused energy on top priorities; created momentum by bringing stakeholders together; drawn upon wide expertise and diverse sources of knowledge; valued the practical experience of those working in field situations; and advanced learning processes including more effective practice models. Collaborative networks and partnerships are more likely to emerge in policy areas where rapid technical solutions are unavailable or undesirable; and thus where negotiated accommodations among stakeholders are necessary and appropriate.

Drawing upon case-studies in Australia, this paper outlines how wicked problems in NRM take different shapes and thus require a wide range of collaborative forms. A typology of institutional arrangements is outlined, based on the diverse empirical examples that have emerged over recent decades. The typology recognises the varieties of networks, alliances and partnerships characteristic of complex NRM. In the context of a federal system of government with three levels of political and regulatory authority, and divergent policy histories across problem issues, it is not surprising that diverse collaborative forms have emerged.

In seeking to tackle various NRM issues, the relative power and capacity of government agencies, industry, community stakeholders, and researchers have a major bearing on how collaborative processes are initiated and conducted. The past experience of these actors in working together is also shown to have a major influence on policy development. Above all, the field of NRM is shown to be characterized by substantial levels of institutional and policy innovation, and nowhere is this more evident than in the variety of collaborative relationships that emerge, consolidate and dissolve over time.

Some policy challenges and program responses may become stabilized and routinized over time, but others are dynamic and turbulent. In some emergent problem-areas, where political attention is less fully engaged, the patterns of collaborative work may be more exploratory and less tightly nested under the exercise of governmental authority.

In the light of these complex causal pathways, judgements as to the

meaning of, and criteria for, the 'effectiveness' of collaborative approaches are the subject to legitimate debate and ongoing learning at all levels.