

Why policy frustration is hard to avoid in multi-governance systems

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Big plans for water reform are a common feature of contemporary politics. The European Union's Water Framework Directive, the South African Government's National Water Management Strategy and the Australian Government's Murray-Darling Basin Plan are typical examples. Almost invariably, however, the aims of these plans are only partially realised. It can be argued that surprise at such disappointments is the result of not understanding the policy process. In most cases policy initiatives are implemented by creating new organisations backed by substantial funds. They rarely abolish the creations of earlier government policies which often continue on in various guises. Clearing the decks of previous policies is a difficult process because significant stakeholder groups have often developed around them. The eventual fate of any new initiative is hard to predict. Even if it dominates the rhetorical public space, it is just one of the contenders in the policy process and just the latest participant to join the ongoing bar room brawl known as water politics.

The comments below apply to many policy areas but they are very relevant to water issues. A factor which makes such policy fights confusing is that institutional fossils from previous eras frequently redefine and rebadge themselves in the conceptual livery of the latest policy fashion (The history of concepts such as ecosystems services, triple bottom line accounting, multi-criteria analysis and the gross human happiness index all provide evidence of takeovers by earlier policy agendas reshaping themselves in more numerical forms.).

Frustration is endemic as the apparently weak work creatively to subvert the ruling consensus and the seemingly powerful don't understand why they cannot get their way.

To understand the factors and forces that shape policy outcomes it is important to analyse the way the many interest groups interact with each other and link to the policy process. High level entities such as the European Union or national governments such as that of South Africa and Australia supply funds to a variety of recipients but usually have to rely on indirect processes of accountability to influence implementation. Lower levels of government often have substantial direct regulatory power but limited funds. Regional organizations such as catchment authorities and water distribution agencies are formally subordinate but have independent corporate standing, often get funding from other sources, have ready access to politicians at all levels and also to non-government organisations that are active in the international arena. Research bodies and research and development corporations are irrelevant most of the time but periodically provide findings that bolster some stakeholder positions, discredit others and shift the basic assumptions upon which policy debates are conducted.

Even more politically active are the industry bodies and large companies emerging as irrigation based agriculture becomes more business orientated. Banks and commercial organizations can also exert significant influence through their purchasing and lending policies. In addition, local and regional governments have planning powers that can play a decisive role at the micro-level. Largely excluded from all these interactions most of the time are members of the general community. They tend to be involved only intermittently but when activated in the mass can be a decisive and unpredictable political force.

These features are given additional scope by the dynamics of federal political systems. Government to government agreements, for example, are different from those between governments and non-government institutions. Even if one is formally subordinate to the other, governments do not impose penalties on other governments in the same way they do on non-government institutions and people. It can be observed that politicians interact with politicians from other governments - national, state and local - with an extra dimension of independence that comes from them being elected in contrast with officials who are appointed to boards or employed by the various government agencies.

Federal systems also have more distinct legal and administrative zones. Within jurisdictions leaders have the capacity to integrate the activities of the officials that answer to them. But with officials in other jurisdictions their power is more indirect. It is likely that incompatibilities and inconsistencies of laws and regulations will be more likely to emerge between jurisdictions than within them. In addition, around each of the semi-autonomous

legal and administrative zones based on the different centres of government, particular cultures and patterns of behaviour are likely to develop. These tend to be self-perpetuating. For the officials and related stakeholders who have developed relationships and unique patterns of behaviour in their own sub-zone the introduction of reforms to improve system wide consistency and reduce overall transaction costs is a threat not a benefit.

In any political system where discretionary decisions can influence who gets what, when, where and how, there will be lobbyists working for special treatment. Around each of the jurisdictions in a multi-level governance system there develops distinct lobbying and pressure group activity. To maximise their leverage lobbyists often go jurisdiction shopping and play one government off against the other. In a unitary system this is harder to do because ultimately the various agencies all answer to the same senior leadership group. Another dimension of the policy process which is affected by the federal system is the relationship between politicians and media. In Europe, South Africa, Australia and other federations, much of the public media such as radio, television and newspapers are still primarily focused on regional cities. Online media is potentially wider in scope but in practice it too is usually community or regionally orientated. It all makes for a very pluralist policy world.

A major additional factor encouraging diversity is that multi-level governance systems such as federations, have more elections. At any given time elections are a looming prospect somewhere. There can often be significant political benefit for politicians to highlight, exaggerate or deliberately foster differences with politicians in other jurisdictions. They can thus claim to be defending the interests of their constituents in a hostile world. (This can be a self-fulfilling perception. Politicians thinking defensively will often act in hostile ways in relation to their neighbours who can respond similarly and thereby provide justification for the original suspicions.) These features are accentuated by the variety of voting systems that are used. Different voting methods produce different results from the same voting public. The result is a highly politicised environment in which elections somewhere are usually imminent.

All these factors create a policy environment in which full blown success is extremely unlikely. Beyond the excitement of the initial policy launch in most cases the best that can be hoped for is a degree of influence on outcomes in the medium term. Initiatives are introduced to contexts in which earlier policy agendas will probably still retain considerable power to block or distort major themes. Successful policy innovators need to be able to negotiate with other already established interests and build coalitions. This process requires clear understanding of which elements are core and what can be compromised or bargained away. The complexity and unpredictability of such activities places a high premium on the

need for skilled policy leaders.

References:

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