Framing the policy context

Fostering the conditions for effective water governance in Australian policy is about recognising that water management issues occur within complex, dynamic and uncertain situations; that is, in the context of a ‘wicked’ problem. Water policy in Australia over the past three decades has been framed within a market-based perspective that views policy inadequacies as market failures and has traditionally drawn on rational scientific input to provide ‘value free’ research for developing policy. This perspective does not capture failures and opportunities that exist beyond economic markets in a whole-of-system approach to include the relationships within and between social-cultural, institutional, economic and ecological systems.

Policy implications

Setting water governance policy within a ‘wicked’ problem framework demands new ways of developing and implementing policy. Such framing emphasises the need for reflexive social learning to influence transitions in research and policy for greater adaptability to ever-changing conditions. Systemic policy development and implementation involves engagement with a wide range of research and policy stakeholders across water catchments including the integration of knowledge and value systems from academia, science, government and catchment communities. Diverse conversations can then occur around water governance which opens up and makes visible the real-world complexity of natural resource management. This allows for the expansion of the socio-political context of stakeholder views and democratises decision making for more responsive policy. Questions around whose knowledge and evidence counts and whose knowledge and evidence are marginalised during the policy process can be asked and scrutinised. These sentiments resonate with those presenters who participated in the Early Career Research Workshop during the National Water Governance Research Initiative in 2011. The rational planning model has traditionally disregarded these fundamental political aspects of research and policy where policy practitioners working under this model can become ‘locked-in’ to inflexible, linear and technocratic approaches.

Policy recommendations

Based on the policy context and implications for water governance in Australia in conjunction with the outcomes of the National Water Governance Research Initiative, we offer the following policy and research reforms and recommendations:

National water institutions

Expand the objectives of the National Water Commission to more fully support and fund future water governance research, continue to build professional and community networks around water management and act as an independent assessor of water reform in Australia to increase accountability, compliance and monitoring.

Policy praxis

Foster robust, extensive and strategic stakeholder participation and public engagement to include indigenous and marginalised communities during the policy process. Integrate self-reflexive relational processes involving individuals, social groups and organisations for holistic engagement, learning and cultural change in water governance matters as part of a systemic social learning agenda to build adaptive capacity in policy processes. Intentional and fortuitous social learning practices can help to build innovative ways of knowing and develop new relational capacities in terms of understanding organisational roles and forms of learning (Pahl-Wostl et al., 2008). Such processes may create communities of interest, conversation and practice that can help to progress innovative institutional design that is fit for purpose within and beyond the water sector. Investment in social learning, and other alternative and/or complementary governance mechanisms offers a means for developing adaptive institutions with greater response opportunities to address water issues.

Currently there is no national policy platform that directly links decision-making and regulation across sectors to create ‘joined up’ policy systems (Pittock, 2011). We recommend the development of an initiative that would seek to integrate water policy with other relevant policy areas (e.g. climate change and energy) for comprehensive, linked policy responses to sustainability issues.
Governance research

It is critical that research continues to capture experimentation in social learning processes through adopting comparative and case-orientated research methodologies. It became apparent during the WGRI workshops and feedback from participant surveys that there is a need to invest in explorations of best practice in flexible governance. This could include sponsoring international research for policy lessons, supporting internships in government for researchers and post graduates and establishing researcher links with professional organisations to understand and develop knowledge brokering. These explorations would help to identify governance features that promote more responsive NRM planning, particularly involving local people and how to develop effective connections between agencies and stakeholders through leadership and facilitation. There is also a need to develop government standards for data and research archiving for interdisciplinary research projects with better public access to information.

Such a research policy agenda has been successfully demonstrated in the United Kingdom through the Rural Economy and Land Use Programme (RELU) (Phillipson et al., 2011). Following similar lines to our recommendations, this program invested in training and career development for interdisciplinary researchers through dedicated studentships and fellowship schemes. It also pioneered collaborations between social and natural sciences providing a strategic role for social scientists in problem framing, stakeholder engagement and analysing complex socio-technical systems. Projects were specifically prepared for data sharing to build cohesive data sets and facilitate information harvesting. The outcomes of such practices have lead to capacity building in interdisciplinary research, knowledge exchanges and integrated knowledge (Phillipson et al., 2011). Under such an agenda research products provide evidence-based knowledge to inform multiple policy communities and stakeholders.

References


Further Information

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