

Evaluating collaborative approaches to governance for water allocation in Canada: Lessons from Ontario

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Challenge

Collaborative approaches to environmental governance are becoming commonplace around the western world. In Canada, all jurisdictions are using various forms of collaboration to address water issues. With few exceptions, the collaborative processes address problems that exist in whole or in part in rural areas. Thus, the agriculture sector is a critical participant. This certainly is the case in Ontario, especially in the case of collaborative processes designed to address low water conditions and droughts.

The purpose of this research was to evaluate the effectiveness and appropriateness of collaborative approaches to dealing with water scarcity and conflicting demands for water. The Province of Ontario provided the institutional setting for the study. We were particularly concerned with the extent to which collaboration provides an effective and appropriate basis for water sharing in cases where agriculture is a prominent user. This led us to a focus on the Ontario Low Water Response (LWR) program.

Ontario's Low Water Response program is the primary vehicle through which water shortages and droughts are addressed in the province. The program's overall functioning and effectiveness have been studied previously, but little or no attention has been given to understanding the extent to which this collaborative has produced outcomes that have been protected by the provincial government. This is a particularly important concern because the Province of Ontario, through the Ontario Ministry of the Environment (and Climate Change) has ultimate authority for dealing with water shortages through its Permit to Take Water Program. Experiences from around the world demonstrate that a failure to respect the outcomes of collaborative processes undermines their effectiveness and leads to considerable dissatisfaction. At the same time, from the perspective of democratic legitimacy, the province remains accountable. All jurisdictions are struggling to resolve the tension between these two objectives.

Project

Drought is a challenging natural disaster. Droughts can affect vast areas, but their impacts will vary locally. These impacts can be made worse by the actions of local water users. How best to respond to water shortages resulting from droughts is a question faced in countries around the world. In Ontario, the provincial government is ultimately responsible for deciding how water is used, but it relies on timely input from the local level. This means that local participation, and buy-in from water users, are essential. Through a program known as Ontario Low Water Response, the provincial government has established collaborative Low Water Response (LWR) teams at the local level to provide critical local input.

In this project, we first investigated whether governments are using input from the collaborative LWRs in making decisions about droughts and water shortages. In a second stage of the project, we partnered with representatives of provincial government agencies

involved in drought response, and with Conservation Ontario, the umbrella group that represents Ontario's conservation authorities. With the goal of finding ways to improve Ontario's system, we explored how collaborative processes for drought response function in countries around the world.

Through the first stage of the research we found that collaborative processes created important social benefits, such as improved communication and relationship building both between water users and government, and among water users. However, we also discovered tension between recommendations of some LWR teams and the provincial government's decision making processes. This led to collaborative groups questioning the government's commitment to local input and participation in drought decision making.

In the second stage, we surveyed experiences in 11 jurisdictions around the world. We found that collaboration played multiple roles in drought management and planning, including addressing impacts of drought and determining drought conditions. Drawing on insights from the research, the report synthesizes implications for Ontario's approach to drought management.

Outputs

This research has resulted in scholarly journal publications and end-user reports to date:

- Roth, A.P., and de Loë, R.C. 2015. Addressing Drought: A Survey of Canadian and International Experiences. Waterloo, ON: Water Policy and Governance Group. [Report to Stakeholders]

Additionally, this research has been disseminated through several presentations and meetings:

- Water Conservation and Efficiency in Ontario Agriculture Symposium. Farm & Food Care Ontario. Guelph: ON, March 6, 2014
- Evaluating Outcomes of Collaborative Drought Management Programs. Presentation for Ontario Drought Outlook 2015. Peterborough: ON, May 13 and 20, 2015
- Roth, A. and R.C. de Loë. 2014. Respecting Outcomes in Collaborative Governance: A Low Water Response Case Study. Presented at CWRA 2014 Canada Water Resources Congress, June 2-4, 2014, Hamilton, Ontario.
- Evaluating Collaborative Approaches to Governance for Water Allocation. Presentation for WEPCN AGM. Calgary, AB: September 3, 2015.
- Alyssa Roth participated in North American Drought Workshop. Toronto, ON. June 17 – 19, 2014

Outcomes

Outcomes include:

- Strengthened relationships with partners. The research team was able to answer questions the partners had but could not answer themselves due to resource constraints.
- Changes in policy. Worked closely with people who are directly involved in any changes to OLWR. Produced a report that partners sought and worked with the team on.
- Increased knowledge. Research addressed the question of outcomes and the relationship between collaborative processes and the democratic state. The project's survey of 11 jurisdictions' drought management systems laid a foundation and provided a useful resource that is freely available.

Research Team and Partners:

Research Team:

Dr. Rob de Loë, University of Waterloo

Partners:

Ontario Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Rural Affairs
Conservation Ontario

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