Landcare Research
Manaaki Whenua
POLICY BRIEF
Insights for government, councils and industry

Evaluating a collaborative process

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SUMMARY

Collaborative processes are being promoted as an alternative decision-making process for managing freshwater resources in New Zealand. This is a relatively recent phenomenon, and, given its growing popularity, it is important to develop and apply methods and criteria for evaluation, to determine strengths and weaknesses, and to identify best practices for effective use of the collaborative model.

Evaluation based on multiple criteria and at several points in time can assist those involved in designing and organizing collaborative processes to ensure the process is responsive to stakeholders' and achieves its objectives. The success of both the process and the outcome of collaborative processes can be effectively appraised using participant surveys.

Efforts at setting water quality and quantity limits in catchments throughout the country have become contentious and often litigious processes, in which polarizing and 'positions-based' bargaining is the norm. In keeping with the recommendations of the Land and Water Forum (2012) and as part a wider suite of freshwater reforms, collaboration in decision-making processes is now being widely promoted as a promising and constructive alternative to resolving conflict over the management of water resources in New Zealand (MfE 2013).

THE TANK COLLABORATIVE PROCESS

In 2012 the Hawke's Bay Regional Council convened a collaborative stakeholder group to recommend water quantity limits and water quality targets for the Greater Heretaunga and Ahuriri catchment plan change. The process, referred to locally as the TANK group (an acronym for the Tutaekuri, Ahuriri, Ngaruroro and Karamu river catchments) is made up of approximately 30 individuals from agricultural and horticultural sectors, environmental and community interest groups, and tangata whenua. In addition to working towards consensus recommendations for freshwater quality and quantity in the catchments, the TANK process has provided an opportunity to develop, in real-time, a case-study example of how to prepare for, conduct, and evaluate a collaborative process.

This paper describes the criteria and methods being used to evaluate the collaborative process and outcome, in the Hawke's Bay.

WHY EVALUATE?

Collaborative approaches to decision-making and planning processes have been widely adopted in other countries, and there is now a growing body of empirical examples and evaluative literature (Leach et al. 2002, Gunton 2003, Frame et al. 2004, Sabatier et al. 2005, Ansell and Gash 2008, Innes and Booher 2010, Morton et al. 2012). Evidence from case studies of collaborative approaches show these processes can generate higher quality, and more creative and durable agreements that are more successfully implemented due to increased public buy-in and reduced conflict. Collaboration can generate social capital, by facilitating improved relationships between stakeholders, generating new stakeholder networks, enhancing communication skills, and co-producing new knowledge with stakeholders (Morton et al. 2011, Podestá et al. 2013). However, collaborative processes are a relatively recent phenomenon, particularly when compared with historical planning and decision-making processes. In New Zealand, collaborative approaches are becoming increasingly popular, and processes have been used, are currently underway or are being considered in almost every region in the country. Given the expected growth in the use of collaborative processes for freshwater management in New Zealand, it is important to develop, apply, and extend approaches to evaluating collaboration to assess strengths and weaknesses, and to identify best practices for effective use of the collaborative framework.

WHAT TO EVALUATE?

There are many criteria for evaluating the success of collaborative processes, including the degree of inclusiveness, adequate resources and facilitation, or responsiveness to the existing context. However, no collaborative process can be designed for all eventualities at the outset and collaborative processes are often large-scale, long-term projects that evolve through different cycles of goal setting and key political relationships. Therefore, the ultimate success factor is building in both the capacity to generate feedback on the collaborative process and the flexibility to re-design the process based on the feedback from stakeholders.

The conveners of processes should consider both built-in formative and summative evaluations, i.e. assessments of the on-going *process* of collaboration as well as the *outcomes*. An evaluation of outcomes includes analysis of all desirable outcomes, and not simply whether or not consensus was reached

(Frame et al. 2004, Cullen et al. 2010, Bryson et al. 2013). Considering in advance what the evaluation criteria might be, can also assist with planning the collaborative process and need not be resource intensive.

WHEN TO EVALUATE?

There is a significant literature on evaluation of collaborative processes; however, with few exceptions, they are all *ex post* assessments, and often limited in scope. Longitudinal formal evaluations are relatively uncommon, but they can be an important tool in the early stages of the process, to refine the process, help identify stakeholders that should be represented, or anticipate any potential sticking points.

The evaluation of the TANK process is longitudinal, i.e. assessments have been conducted near the beginning of the process (soon after the group was convened), and near the middle of the formal series of meetings. A comprehensive evaluation will be undertaken at the end of the process, to gauge the success of the outcome criteria.

HOW TO EVALUATE?

Evaluations conducted elsewhere have used a combination of methods, including orders of outcomes and logic models, surveys, questionnaires, and interviews.

For the evaluation of the TANK process, an online-survey is being used as the main evaluation tool. This is supplemented by the use of feedback forms (with which participants are provided following each meeting), informal feedback from stakeholders (via email, or personal communication/in conversation), and interviews with key stakeholders and convenors.

A link inviting stakeholders to complete the survey is emailed, and printed copies are also provided on request. Response rates for the first two surveys have been over 80%.

The surveys are based primarily on an integrated assessment framework, bringing together evaluation criteria from a number of other studies (Moote et al. 1997, Gunton et al. 1998, Innes and Booher 1999, Frame et al. 2004, Morton et al. 2012). The evaluation criteria from each of these previous studies have been identified and compiled into a full list of 14 criteria related to the success of the collaborative process itself (i.e. desirable features of process design) and 11 outcome criteria, which define objectives related to a successful outcome to collaboration (Frame et al. 2004, Morton et al. 2011).

The process and outcome criteria and a short definition for each are shown in Tables 1 and 2. There are multiple questions used to test for each criterion. The questions are designed as statements that require respondents to indicate their agreement using a 5-point scale (strongly agree, agree, neither agree nor disagree, disagree, strongly disagree). For example, the following three statements are being used to test the 'perceived as successful' outcome criterion.

Outcome Criterion: Perceived as successful.

1. The TANK process was a positive experience.
2. The TANK process was a success.
3. I am satisfied with the outcome of the TANK process.

The first two surveys conducted to date are testing only for the process criteria, and the final survey will evaluate both process and outcome, using the same method.

Table 1: Criteria used to evaluate success of the process of collaboration

Criterion	Definition
Voluntary participation and commitment	Affected or interested stakeholders participate voluntarily and are committed to the process.
Self-design	The parties involved work together to design the process to suit the needs of the stakeholders.
Clear ground rules	As the process is initiated, a comprehensive procedural framework is established that includes clear terms of reference, operating procedures, schedule, and protocols.
Equal opportunity and resources	The process provides for equal and balanced opportunity for effective participation of all interested/affected stakeholders.
Principled negotiation and respect	The process operates according to the conditions of principled negotiation including mutual respect, trust, and understanding.
Accountability	The process and its participants are accountable to the broader public and their own constituencies.
Flexible, adaptive, creative	Flexibility is designed into the process to allow for adaptation and creativity in problem solving.
High-quality information	The process incorporates high-quality information into decision making.
Time limits	Realistic deadlines and milestones are established and managed throughout the process.
Commitment to implementation and monitoring	The process and final agreement include commitments to implementation and monitoring.
Effective process management	The collaborative process is managed and coordinated effectively and in a neutral manner.
Independent facilitation	The process uses an independent facilitator throughout the process.

Table 2: Criteria used to evaluate success of the ***outcomes*** of collaboration

Criterion	Definition
Agreement	The process reaches an agreement accepted by all stakeholders.
Perceived as successful	The process and outcomes are perceived as successful by stakeholders.
Conflict reduced	The process reduces conflict.
Superior to alternative	The process is perceived by stakeholders as being superior to the alternative.
Innovation and creativity	The process produces innovative ideas and outcomes.
Knowledge, understanding and skills	Stakeholders gained knowledge, understanding, and skills by participating in the collaborative process.
Relationships and social capital	The process created new personal and working relationships, and raised social capital among participants.
Second-order effects	The process had second-order effects, including changes in behaviours, spin-off partnerships, umbrella groups, collaborative activities, new practices, and/or new institutions. Participants worked together on issues or projects outside the collaborative process.
Information	The process produced improved data, information and analyses through joint fact-finding that stakeholders understand and accept as accurate.
Public interest	The outcomes are regarded as meeting the common good or larger public interest, and not just the interests of stakeholders involved. Wider environmental, social, cultural, and economic objectives met.
Understanding and support of CPs	The process resulted in increased understanding of, and participants support for, collaborative processes/collaborative stakeholder groups.

A second section of the survey, presents a series of unordered statements related to collaborative process (Table 3). The statements, based on a review of the evaluative literature, require respondents to indicate which statements they feel are most important to achieving a successful collaborative decision-making process.

Table 3: Criteria for successful collaborative decision-making processes

Criteria
All affected stakeholder/interest groups are represented.
Clearly defined purpose and objectives.
Voluntary participation.
Consensus requirement.
Clearly defined alternative if consensus not reached.
Having an urgent issue to address, that provides an incentive to each agreement.
Decision-making process is designed in advance, but is flexible and can change if necessary.
All stakeholders are committed to collaborative decision-making process.
Clear terms of reference.
Having an independent facilitator or mediator.
Clear timetable, including a deadline.
Access to high quality information in a timely manner.
Equal representation of gender in the stakeholder group.
Equal opportunity and resources (skills, resources, money, support) among participants in the group.
Commitment to a plan for implementation and monitoring.
Participants have a clear understanding of the different interests represented.
Participants are formally accountable to a constituency or group, and not just there as individuals.
Participants have equal opportunity to speak about their values.
The decision-making process is transparent, and accessible to the public.
Mutual respect and trust during negotiation.

The final section of the TANK survey uses open-ended questions to assess stakeholder perceptions of the strengths and any weaknesses of the process.

SURVEY FINDINGS AND SUMMARY

Two surveys have been completed to date, and the results show a high level of support for the process. For example, when asked to record their level of agreement with the 'purpose and incentives' criterion statements, over 90% of respondents indicated they agreed/strongly agreed that "Collaborative decision-making is a step in the right direction for water management in the Hawke's Bay".

With each successive meeting, participants have been expressing greater confidence and higher degrees of satisfaction with the process. One of the advantages of administering a survey early in the process, is that it drew attention to the need for science information in a timely fashion. Subsequently, i.e. after the first

survey, presentations were made to the TANK group by scientists from the regional council, and a number of reports have now been made available.

A success factor for collaborative processes is continuous feedback and redesign. This is only possible if objectives and measurable criteria for achievement have been determined from the outset. The 25 process and outcome criteria presented here can provide useful guidance to those considering a collaborative process.

By evaluating the process relatively early on, an important baseline can be established that will help trace social learnings and track the formation of social capital, as well as identify any potential concerns. This need not be resource intensive, and a survey can be administered online at low cost. Evaluations then, ideally, should be longitudinal and consider both process and outcome criteria.

Finally, expertise in evaluation may be an important part of the skill set for a team preparing to undertake a collaborative process.

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