

Emotions and expertise in environmental policy work: an alternative approach to understanding governance

Introduction

Social context

The way in which river corridors (and other environmental issues) are managed is a concern at present. We are frequently reminded by the media of the climate uncertainty that is now being experienced, both in the UK and around the world. Heavy rainfall, flooding and drought are all increasingly familiar phenomena, and something we are told will become more common in the future.

There have been policy responses at many levels to the management of water e.g. the Water Framework Directive (European), Pitt Review and Flood and Water Management Act (national), and Catchment Management Plans (local). In these, and in other policy areas, there is a tendency towards collaborative governance, which aims to involve stakeholders in the decisions that affect them. A commitment to this way of working has recently been announced in the context of the 'Big Society' and the Localism Bill (2010).

Collaborative Governance

The term collaborative governance covers quite a range of ways of working. Two of the main aspects of this are organisations working together towards solutions, and the involvement of the general public in decisions.

Published literature often stresses the tendency of power relationships to dominate these governance processes, with powerful partners (explicitly or implicitly) having more control and dominating the process.



One suggestion for addressing these problems is the 'collaborative turn'. It is based on the idea that governance processes that focus on discussion and consensus building will help to avoid some of the pitfalls.

However, there are some concerns that this solution is simply rhetoric and does not address the underlying problems with governance processes.

An alternative approach to understanding governance

Research carried out as part of the URSULA project proposes an alternative approach to understanding the problems of collaborative governance. It explores the way that different individuals engage with the governance process at the site level, and the four key factors that affect this:

- How a site is defined/identified;
- How the policy process is influenced;
- The relationships different individuals have to the site; and
- Questions of scale.



Context: Rivers in South Yorkshire

The particular history of rivers in South Yorkshire affects the way that local people relate to the river environment.

The development of water mills along the river corridors was prevalent from as early as the 16th Century, and continued until the 20th Century. Water power supported South Yorkshire's early industries, in particular the world renowned cutlery industry.

The marks of this are still visible along the rivers, with the frequent incidence of weirs and disused millponds characterising the river corridors. The growth of the steel industry marked the rivers with canalisation and heavy pollution, and its decline left many areas in disrepair.

Flooding is also a significant factor in the history of South Yorkshire's rivers, with two instances of serious flooding marked in local memories. The Sheffield Flood of 1864 resulted from a burst dam on the River Loxley, devastating much of Sheffield and leaving a trail of damage as far as Doncaster. More recently, the flooding of 2007 created problems across South Yorkshire, hitting national headlines.

Methodology

The research was based mainly on interviews with stakeholders who had been involved in the decision-making processes at two case study sites. The interviews were supplemented by relevant documents and site photographs over the course of the governance process, to aid understanding of the decision-making process and the factors involved in reaching specific decisions.

The Case Studies

The case studies involved decision-making processes in relation to flood alleviation works at two contrasting sites.

Centenary Riverside, on the River Don in the Templeborough area of Rotherham, was part of the large British Steel works, closed in 1988, known locally as the Seven Sisters because of the seven chimneys on the site. The buildings were demolished and the land sold for private development, although at the time of the Centenary Riverside flood alleviation project the land was a brownfield site.

Located in a heavily industrialised area suffering from decline, and bounded by a dual carriageway, railway and canal, the site had failed to attract investment. As a large empty site directly adjacent to the river it was targeted by Rotherham Metropolitan Borough Council as a suitable location for flood alleviation works to address some of the water management problems faced by Rotherham. The project was led by the Council, with the support of central government regeneration funding.

Malin Bridge is in North Sheffield on the confluence of the Rivers Rivelin and Loxley. Located in a busy suburb, it is surrounded by residential areas, light industry and commercial properties. The area is heavily used by private and public transport, including buses and trams.

The space is also a gateway to the Rivelin and Loxley valleys, two local sites offering access to natural environments. The site was heavily tree covered, mostly with self-seeded trees and plants, and had been previously designated as a Local Nature Reserve. It was used by a local school for environmental education, and was subject to infrequent clean-ups by volunteers.

The location was identified by the Environment Agency for clearance for flood alleviation in a programme of works provoked by the flooding of June 2007. The Defra-funded programme was led by the Environment Agency.

Findings

Defining the site

The two main factors in identifying/defining a site are what the people to whom the site matters (the stakeholders) understand as 'the site', and defining the physical site boundaries.

Stakeholders are often defined by their 'interests'; but this was found to be difficult in practice as those who care about a site will not necessarily be those who have a financial stake in the site and projects.

Those who care about a site may live locally, or may live far away and only visit the area occasionally. Some stakeholders may develop an attachment to a site after working with the site over a long time period.

The physical definition of a site may seem, at first, to be easily identifiable. However, the boundaries of the site can be difficult to strictly define, due to differing perceptions. At the Malin Bridge site there was a great deal of confusion between different stakeholders about the site boundaries.

The location of a site in relation to other local features can also be difficult to determine. A community may be close in proximity to a site, but barriers such as major roads or developments with no public access may prevent physical access by these communities, resulting in the communities not associating themselves with the site.

Other communities may feel a close affinity with the site, despite being less close geographically or being located in a different administrative area.

These types of issues can only be understood by spending time around the site and speaking to visitors and other potential stakeholders, and can be overlooked in attempting to define stakeholders from a distance.



Influencing the Policy Process

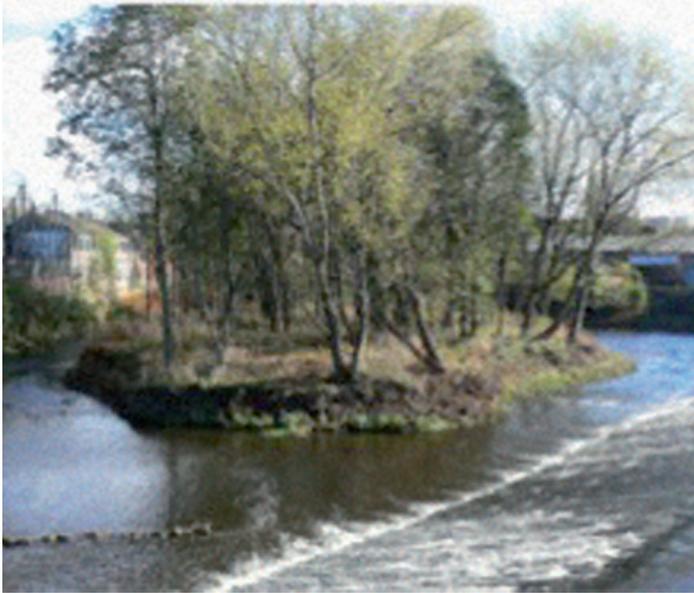
Two factors appeared to be particularly significant in the case studies: the use of knowledge in the governance process, and the way that expectations of the governance process affect the decision-making process.

In the governance process, knowledge of professional organisations or individuals is generally accepted as being expert, and therefore viewed as more useful or valid than other types of knowledge (particularly lay or local knowledge). This 'non-expert' knowledge is given less attention in decision-making and this potentially valuable knowledge, which may have arisen from many years of using a site, is often dismissed in deference to the 'expert' view without investigation/validation.

In both cases, there was evidently an assumption about how the governance process should happen, and that collaboration was an essential part of this. However, the obligation to work in a collaborative way did not necessarily result in a process where all stakeholders were actively engaged.

It may be that the collaborative process is followed at a high level, but only selected input incorporated into the decision-making so that, despite apparent engagement and collaboration, the decisions do not substantially change.





Questions of Scale

At present, different scales of working are often incompatible with one another, with decisions made at national scales being rejected at local scales because they do not fit with local ideas of how change needs to be implemented. However, often approaches to change on river corridors are implemented from the top down, with decisions made at strategic levels imposed on the local scale.

The findings suggest that despite concerns about strategic thinking and the need for plans to be coordinated across different sites, there is still room for some of the contributions that can be offered by site scale or bottom-up working to be considered at strategic level.

One of the most significant problems that arises with river corridor governance at all scales in the UK is the question of responsibility, given the complex legislative and organisational frameworks that exist. This makes any process of change difficult and complex.

Relating to Place

The research showed that many stakeholders have relationships to place that affect the way they engage with the governance process. This is not just the local stakeholders that we often assume have emotional relationships to place, but also the professional stakeholders, often thought of as being 'rational'.

These emotions affect the way that individuals engage with the governance process, and so the outcomes of the process are affected by emotions.

The research suggests that the emotional relationships to place are formed through a process of collective memory. This involves individual memories (personal experiences), social memories (collective experiences and the memories of others), cultural memories (such as photographs and archives of the area) and political memories (collective ideas about what the place means, expressed in local newspapers for example) of a place that are brought together.

Collective memory is important in retaining a sense of place in a site, so change to the site that does not in some way reflect the collective memory of that place may be difficult for people to accept.

Key messages

At present, the ways in which river corridor governance is carried out tends to restrict the contributions that can be made by lay or local stakeholders and the emotional relationships to place of many stakeholders.

The findings suggest that more account should be taken of the less 'rational' arguments that are contributed to the governance process, mostly at the site scale.

This would lead to more widely satisfactory solutions at the site scale, and the inclusion of these 'irrational' arguments at larger scales would help to reduce some of the difficulties of working across different scales.

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