INNOVATION IN ENVIRONMENTAL POLICY EDUCATION THROUGH COALITIONS: THE GROUNDWATER POLICY EDUCATION PROJECT

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The Groundwater Policy Education Project (GPEP) has been a collaborative effort of Cooperative Extension, the Soil and Water Conservation Society and the Freshwater Foundation. It was one of eleven projects funded from 1988-92 by the Innovative Public Policy Education Program of the Kellogg Foundation and Farm Foundation. This program's theme was: that advances in education and policymaking on controversial issues could be enhanced through formation of coalitions of diverse organizations committed to balance and objectivity.

Project Goals and Strategies

The overall goal of GPEP was to enhance state and local decision makers' abilities to formulate public policies for improved management of groundwater resources through formation of coalitions. Specific objectives were to: 1) broaden views of groundwater issues and policy alternatives; 2) increase support and resources, primarily of an informational nature, available to state and local decision makers; and 3) increase decision makers' understanding of the social, behavioral and institutional dimensions of groundwater issues.

In order to accomplish the above objectives, a set of educational resources on rural groundwater management and policy was created. These materials included: the March/April, 1990, Journal of Soil and Water Conservation, a special issue entitled “Rural Groundwater Quality Management: Emerging Issues and Public Policies for the 1990s” published by the Soil and Water Conservation Society; the Groundwater and Public Policy leaflet series published by the Freshwater Foundation; and a pilot project leaders' handbook. These materials were utilized in pilot projects developed and conducted by coalitions in California, Florida, Iowa, New York, North Carolina, Pennsylvania and Wisconsin over an eighteen-month period in 1990 and 1991.
In each state, partnerships were formed between Cooperative Extension and state and local agencies, interest groups and educational and research organizations (Table 1). These coalitions differed in the amount of extension representation, extent of past working relationships, organizational structure (e.g., number of groups, formal vs. informal, sharing of resources, decision authority and workload), target audience (state or local decision makers; policymakers vs. uninvolved citizens or groups) and other factors.

Table 1. Pilot Project Coalitions and Leaders

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>State</th>
<th>Members</th>
<th>Leader</th>
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<tr>
<td>California</td>
<td>University of California Extension on three campuses, the Department of Agricultural and Resource Economics, University of California at Berkeley, Western Water Education Foundation, University of California Water Resources Center, a group process expert, and a public policy analysis expert.</td>
<td>Tim Wallace, University of California, Berkeley.</td>
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<td>Florida</td>
<td>Florida Department of Environmental Regulation, the St. Johns River Management District, the South Florida Water Management District, the University of Florida’s College of Law, a private law firm that specializes in water, land use and environmental law, the Florida Cooperative Extension Service, and the University of Florida’s Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences.</td>
<td>Roy Carriker, University of Florida.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Iowa</td>
<td>Iowa State University Cooperative Extension, Iowa Natural Heritage Association, and Winneshiek County local organizations including American Association of University Women, Citizens for Responsible Waste Alternatives, Decorah Parent-Teachers Association, Winneshiek County Farm Bureau, Winneshiek County Cattlemen’s Association, Winneshiek County Resource Enhancement and Protection Committee.</td>
<td>Steve Padgitt, Iowa State University.</td>
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<tr>
<td>New York</td>
<td>Cornell Cooperative Extension, regional planning and development boards, New York Department of Environmental Conservation, and other federal and state agencies.</td>
<td>David Allee, Cornell University.</td>
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<td>North Carolina</td>
<td>The Groundwater Section—Division of Environmental Management, North Carolina Cooperative Extension, and state offices of the NC Association of County Commissioners and the League of Municipalities. The local coalition included Extension and the Quality of Natural Resources Committee, which represented environmental, city and county government, commercial/industrial, and agricultural interests in Gaston County.</td>
<td>Leon Danielson, North Carolina State University.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Wisconsin</td>
<td>Agencies, local government associations, manufacturing and commerce representatives, the Farm Bureau, Environment Wisconsin, and the University of Wisconsin Extension.</td>
<td>Stephen Born, University of Wisconsin, Madison.</td>
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Educational strategies used in the projects included: needs assessment surveys, state and local conferences or workshops, preparation of localized educational materials, media interactions, "train the trainer" events, and ongoing evaluation processes to monitor project progress. Several projects utilized funds to build upon or enhance an ongoing effort. One project undertook specific steps at the outset to institutionalize their coalition.

Selected Outcomes

The outcomes of GPEP can be described at both the national and pilot project level. At the national level, the project provided greater emphasis and attention to the public policy and institutional aspects of groundwater quality issues. This was primarily accomplished through publication in the Spring, 1990, special issue of the Journal of Soil and Water Conservation. In 1991 this publication was one of two given a Community Conservation Award by the Natural Resources Council of America.

Another measure of overall project success was the degree to which key project ideas, educational materials and methods were sustained beyond the project time period or disseminated across geographic boundaries. In 1991, public policy education became one of six national priority areas for Cooperative Extension programming under the President's Water Quality Initiative within the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA). The federal Extension Service of the USDA also funded a project to disseminate the project’s materials and methods to extension faculty and staff throughout the country. The purpose of the workshops was to encourage and strengthen extension programming in water policy education. Workshops were conducted in Denver, Colorado, and Arlington, Virginia during the spring of 1992. Public policy education, coalition building with examples from pilot states, and the Groundwater and Public Policy leaflet series served as the basis for the workshop curriculum. More than 130 representatives from extension organizations in forty-one states, the District of Columbia, Guam and Puerto Rico attended the workshops.

Selected Pilot Project Outcomes

Documentation of project outcomes and evaluation of the success of the coalition approach and educational strategies undertaken were recently completed. The project faced several evaluation challenges, such as the diversity of the state situations and the projects themselves, which made generalizations about the potential of coalitions difficult. Project outcomes were measured along the following continuum developed by Greene and Hahn: 1) changes in coalition members; 2) changes in educational program participants; 3) changes in the policy process; and 4) changes in the issues (e.g.,
framing of issue, recognition of linkages among issues, development or emergence of potential or actual solutions). Most projects reported changes for coalition members and program participants in terms of new skills; expanded knowledge of groundwater issues and policy processes; and increased understanding and appreciation of the perspectives of other participants' in the policy process. However, fewer projects obtained outcomes further along this continuum related to changes in item (3)—changes in the policy process—and item (4)—changes in the issues—within the project period.

Two pilot projects were able to achieve outcomes related to changes in policy process and changes in the issues. The following presentations by Steve Padgitt and Leon Danielson describe the context, strategies, outcomes, and “lessons learned” for local level process-oriented projects in Iowa and North Carolina, respectively.

**Findings and Implications**

It is worth noting some of the characteristics of pilot projects that were found to be associated with outcomes related to policy level, including items (3) and (4) described in the last section. Progress along the continuum of outcomes is indicative of the project’s success providing information and experiences that are useful to policymaking. The findings are taken from Abdalla and Sobel (1992) and Insland (1991).

**Scale.** Two projects, Iowa and North Carolina, produced the greatest number of outcomes within the time frame of the project. Both projects had a county level focus and targeted those affected by, but not currently involved in, policymaking. The county-level focus allowed a matching of resources with an appropriate project scale that permitted a sustained impact on audiences. Also, by undertaking needs assessments and establishing local study committees, each project gave a great deal of attention to process issues, as they educated and involved stakeholders in policymaking. These projects were more successful in going beyond information provision to the more challenging areas of facilitating dialogue and empowerment of citizens and stakeholders (Hahn et al.).

**Diversity.** Coalitions with greater representation from organizations outside extension employed more strategies and achieved a greater number of outcomes. The local level coalitions in Iowa and North Carolina had the least amount of extension representation. Thus, diverse coalitions appear to have greater potential to provide education affecting the policy process. This may suggest that outside organizations can make Cooperative Extension more productive.

Coalitions that were formed from new relationships spent more time in the coalition-building process than those organizations that had worked together prior to the project. Although time consuming
and effort intensive, building new relationships forced issues to come out on the table, had some level of creative tension, and was not business as usual for the organizations. Diverse “new” relationships seem to have created the synergistic effects of working together.

Coalitions that are both diverse and have an early “empowerment” of all members are more likely to have a shared agenda, resulting in a greater number of strategies. Coalitions made up of different organizations that truly cooperate can bring “new” ideas to a coalition, either in terms of sharing techniques, combining and building on others’ experiences with educational strategies, or developing unique approaches. Collaboration that goes beyond sharing the workload to creating new agendas resulted in diverse approaches, broader audiences, and more outcomes further along the change continuum.

Leadership. The working processes of the coalitions influenced their productivity. Both “task” and “process” leadership skills are needed to build and maintain positive working relationships and strong coalitions. Someone must keep things going and provide direction. Keeping people on track and making sure everyone is following through on tasks is needed when working with a group. If there is a breakdown in responsibilities or commitment it needs to be dealt with quickly. This task is an element of accountability. Communication is a leadership function. Both formal and informal communication aid by providing clarity to tasks, documenting experiences needed for a sense of continuity, and serving as a group maintenance activity which allows members to be informed and feel part of the process. There is a need to document what is happening, follow up after meetings or activities, and keep coalition members in the information loop.

Attention to Process. Coalition building and maintenance tasks are ongoing. Coalitions require attention to group process and working relationships. Time and effort are required, as well as the recognition of the importance of interpersonal relationships, for productive functioning of a group. This is clearly seen when membership changes and rebuilding are needed. Careful foundation building in the beginning is an important element evidenced in both the pilot programs and the national coalition. There is a need for people to get to know one another early in the coalition-building process. It is important to focus on the basic interests and goals of each organization and each member before the coalition structure and goals are addressed. Coalition members need to have status, power or authority related to the project. The stage of the project when members become fully involved, or empowered, affects the ownership and responsibility for coalition activities and outcomes.
Conclusions

Based on the experiences and outcomes resulting thus far, it appears coalitions have significant potential as an innovative means for conducting policy education about environmental issues. What are the specific benefits of a coalition approach? The benefits go well beyond reduced duplication of effort, increased coordination and sharing of networks. If organizations truly cooperate in program planning and are willing to explore new ideas and educational delivery methods, a coalition approach can result in a synergism that improves the quantity and quality of educational interactions and experiences. The coalition may itself create an image, a credibility and an objectivity that the organizations alone could not achieve.

A coalition approach can increase the effectiveness of organizations and allow them to learn and adapt to new issues and audiences. For example, traditional ideas or methods from one organization can be shared or combined to create new problem definitions or educational strategies. Collaboration can lead to innovative education and involvement strategies which better meet the needs of diverse audiences. Finally, the development of coalitions can in some cases create mechanisms for effectively transforming data into information that can improve policymaking processes and decisions.

The above mentioned benefits are not obtained without cost. If coalitions are made up of diverse organizations with little previous working relationships, a considerable investment of time and effort will be needed to build and maintain a coalition over time. It is also likely that coalition building may be frustrating, and at times painful, as a shared agenda and purpose is created. Why, one might ask, should we work so hard?

One answer to this question is related to the great need to increase understanding of environmental policy issues and the importance of informed and involved citizens to public policymaking. There are also rewards from the satisfaction of knowing that something could not have been accomplished without a coalition you helped to create and the fun experienced while working and learning with new and interesting people.

REFERENCES


