INITIATING A COALITION FOR GROUNDWATER POLICY EDUCATION: OBSERVATIONS AND LESSONS FROM A RURAL IOWA COUNTY

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In 1988 the Groundwater Public Policy Education Project (GPEP) was funded as part of Farm Foundation's and the Kellogg Foundation's set of projects on coalition building for public policy education. Among other activities, the GPEP effort included pilot projects in seven states to develop and apply a "coalition approach" to deliver public policy education programs. One of the pilot states was Iowa, and I was a liaison to, and to some degree coordinated, the Iowa pilot project.

Context

In 1987, the Iowa General Assembly passed a comprehensive Groundwater Protection Act. Prior to this legislation, the Iowa State University Extension Service conducted seminars on water policy throughout the state. Additionally, a series of news articles on groundwater policy was prepared by a state extension specialist. These news releases were widely used by the state's media. Consequently, another statewide initiative in water policy education was discounted when the Iowa GPEP pilot project was proposed. Rather, a grassroots effort in a single rural county was chosen, Winneshiek, population 21,000, located in far northeastern Iowa.

Among the reasons this county was selected were its potential for groundwater contamination, its unique geological features that were not fully addressed in the statewide legislation, and the lack of evidence that local elected officials or voluntary civic groups were pursuing additional local policy options. Indeed, salience of water quality as a social issue in Winneshiek County appeared to be secondary to more visible issues confronting residents on a more recurring basis, such as jobs, education, and agricultural profitability.

Approximately three years before the pilot project began, a sample of rural residents in the county served as a comparative group for an unrelated water quality project in a nearby county. At that time, survey findings indicated Winneshiek County farmers were less concerned about groundwater quality than were respondents in

the nearby county, but levels of concern among the rural nonfarm populations were similar between the two counties (Padgitt).

In Winneshiek County, the local economy is primarily diversified agriculture, including dairy, small grains and forage crops. This mix makes local agriculture akin to that in neighboring Minnesota and Wisconsin as much as to the predominant row crop (corn and soybeans) and hog operations that pervade farming throughout much of the remainder of the state. In total, agriculture occupies 95 percent of the county's land area and nearly half of the population lives on farms or in open-county areas.

In many places, only a thin mantle of topsoil overlays fractured limestone bedrock, making groundwater susceptible to contamination from the surface. Further, because of the "karst" geology, sinkholes and disappearing streams provide direct conduits from the surface to underground water supplies. Nonetheless, residents in Winneshiek County rely almost exclusively upon groundwater for drinking water as well as for other household and commercial needs.

Although no major groundwater problems had been identified on a widespread basis in the county, there were *a priori* reasons for concern. Potential threats to groundwater include livestock wastes, agricultural fertilizers and pesticides, nonfarm use of fertilizers and pesticides, residential, commercial and industrial wastes, and roadway de-icing products. In addition to the sinkholes, other pathways for groundwater contamination include wells and abandoned wells, underground storage tanks, septic systems and the landfill. Also, emerging evidence suggested groundwater in the county was being affected by nitrates and pesticides. Further, initial testing had found traces of several synthetic organic compounds that may have been leaching from the local landfill.

Implementation

The impetus for the project was participating in GPEP rather than the more typical pattern of acting upon a request received from a local area. Further, a decision was reached early in the pilot to deemphasize the role of the Extension Service. This decision was both strategic and pragmatic. Strategically, and consistent with assumptions of the larger GPEP project, there was a commitment to emphasize a shared partnership in the effort. Also, extension was not necessarily recognized as being a neutral organization for policy education about groundwater.

The decision was pragmatic in the sense that the local extension staff had limited policy education expertise, and campus- and area-based public policy specialists within the system were previously committed to other programming. Consequently, a partnership was forged with the Iowa Natural Heritage Foundation. The foundation

and extension had previously worked cooperatively on groundwater quality projects. At the time of the GPEP pilot, the foundation was interested in expanding its water quality activities in northeastern Iowa; consequently, the objectives of the pilot project were compatible with those of the foundation. As a result, the bulk of the financial resources for the pilot project was subcontracted to the Iowa Natural Heritage Foundation to hire a local coordinator for the project. The local coordinator was a private consultant and a new resident to the county. She maintained a private office rather than being housed at the local extension office.

Four objectives were identified for the project to be implemented at the county level:

- Develop a coalition of local organizations to conduct policy education activities.
- Enhance awareness of and knowledge about public policy options that could be adopted at the local level.
- Bring policy issues before decision makers.
- Encourage and support deliberations about groundwater policy issues and options at the local level.

Forming nurturing the coalition. Organizations contacted to participate in the project were mutually selected by the local coordinator, local extension staff, and liaisons from extension and the Natural Heritage Foundation. Typically the organizations contacted did not define public policy as a major component of their mission. Further, volunteer representatives were novices at public policy education. Although several had interests related to groundwater, they were conditioned to respond to more tangible actions or activities than were offered with this invitation. Part of the vagueness associated with the invitations to join the coalition was conscious and deliberate, i.e. the group was expected to develop its own agenda, and part of it was the inherent nature of public policy education. In retrospect, involving persons having a greater repertoire of public policy experience would have provided the understanding, expertise, and leadership to make the local coordinator role less formidable. Unfortunately, a GPEP-sponsored conference for volunteers in the several pilot states included examples of activities that may have exacerbated as much as alleviated the Iowa group's anxieties about the public policy process.

Ultimately, eight organizations joined and provided representatives for project activities (Iowa Natural Heritage Foundation, Iowa State University Extension, American Association of University Women, Citizens for Responsible Waste Alternatives, Decorah Parent-Teacher's Association, Winneshiek County Cattlemen's Association, Winneshiek County Farm Bureau and Winneshiek County Resource Enhancement and Protection Committee).

Over a period of fifteen months, monthly meetings or activities were held, most often at the County Extension office. During the in-

terim, the local project coordinator spent considerable time and energies maintaining interpersonal and written communication with participants. Except for a few representatives, the coalition activities appeared to be of secondary priority.

Coalition activities. Three educational efforts characterized the project. One was education for the participants themselves, a second was developing background materials for local leaders and policy makers, and a third was policy education with the public.

Education for the participants took several forms. The monthly gatherings were designed to proceed with the agenda for policymakers and the public, but as much attention was assigned to study and learning by the participants themselves. At each monthly gathering at least half of the time was spent with a resource person. This began with further understanding of the policy process and expanded to include technical information, policy options at the local level, and writing model ordinances.

Participants were drawn into the project by accepting requests to assist the local coordinator in conducting a series of focus groups among individuals having interests related to water quality. Ultimately, eight focus group sessions were conducted, one each with chambers of commerce and community betterment groups, agrichemical dealers, County Soil and Water Conservation District Commissioners, the County Board of Supervisors, public school teachers, a consumer group, landowners, and the local board of health. These hour-long discussions were administered by the local coordinator with the help of a volunteer member from the coalition. Summaries of the focus groups were shared with other coalition members, and themes from them were a major factor in designing the public forums and public information efforts. In addition to the focus groups, a sample survey of residents was conducted to assess, in a more representative way, the priority being assigned to the issue, public perceptions of sources threatening groundwater, and attitudes about public policy options.

From this background, a series of three public forums was held: "What Can the State Do?", "What Can the County Do?" and "What Can Individuals Do?". The last forum concerning individual action focused prudent individual behaviors to protect the environment rather than involvement in the public policy process.

An effort, reasonably successful, was made to recruit elected officials to the public forums. In addition, the local coordinator and a member of the coalition visited deliberative bodies (County Soil and Water District Commissioners, County Board of Supervisors and County Planning and Zoning Commission) and urged actions to protect groundwater. Also, appearances were made before several of the sponsoring organizations as well as the media.

The final product developed by the project was a reference man-

ual. It consisted of a review of groundwater resources in the county, sources and routes of contamination, and policy options for protecting the county's groundwater. This document was delivered by the local coordinator and a coalition volunteer to elected officials and influentials throughout the county, including most persons who participated in the focus groups. The document was also widely deposited in local libraries.

Coalition outcomes. Three kinds of outcome were identified at the close of the project's funding. One was increased knowledge. This results from documentation archived in the published report, public awareness through media activities and the public forums, and personal growth of coalition members. Another outcome was the capacity of the county to act if resources become more severely threatened. New linkages were formed among individuals and organizations, and a cadre of persons now have greater sophistication to participate in public policy deliberations. Mutual understanding and cooperation among dissimilar groups were established. This should help facilitate trust in the future when working toward a collective goal is more salient. Finally, some policy outcomes, although modest, were realized. New language enabling local controls to protect groundwater was presented and included in the county's Comprehensive Zoning Plan. Groundwater was included in the Soil and Water District Commissioners five-year resource protection plan, and member groups in the coalition adopted a statement on the importance of groundwater quality for their respective organizations.

Implications for Future Efforts

Coalitions for public policy education. Based on the Iowa experience as well as those in other pilot states, the original assumption of the Farm Foundation and the Kellogg Foundation that extension could be more effective in public policy education if it included other organizations in a coalition framework continues to have merit (Hahn, et al.). Because extension is not universally perceived to be a neutral organization, the coalition approach adds credibility to policy education initiatives. Also, the coalition format allows greater ease when there are efforts to move further along the policy education cycle (House). Traditionally, extension staff become highly anxious when policy education goes beyond clarifying alternatives and consequences. The coalition approach facilitates action steps.

Coalition as a term. At least at the grassroots level, connotations associated with "coalition" make it a less than ideal term for an activity that purports to be neutral and balanced. In some circles, public policy education is, *a priori*, defined as partisan. Using the term "coalition" adds to rather than detracts from this liability. This project soon dropped any reference to coalition. For a while, the term "consortium" was used as a substitute, but it was also abandoned as being too "high brow." Eventually, participating organizations and

volunteers were merely referred to as co-sponsors and their representatives. "Advisory group" was not appropriate because there was not a dominant organization.

Absence of a lead organization. As initially designed, there were advantages to this project not having a lead organization, but there were also disadvantages. The project's successes were largely traceable to the local coordinator. Although she was a member of the community and active in local civic affairs, once the project ended, so did ongoing coalition activities. Personally, she was greatly empowered with this project, but the continuity with participating individuals and organizations soon diminished when the formal part of the project ended. The Iowa Natural Heritage Foundation did not have a sufficient county-based organization to nurture the group. The local county extension staff might still assume this role. During the project, local extension staff members were active but were careful not be dominate. Potentially, recent structural changes in the extension organization and redefinition of the local agent's role could give impetus to greater attention to public policy locally. If so, the pilot experience would be a major asset and might be carried forward.

Groundwater, public policy, and grassroots involvement. A coalition for groundwater and public policy education is highly specific. In sparsely populated areas in which elected officials are largely part-time or voluntary and where organization memberships significantly overlap, topical coalitions for public policy education is problematic, especially if persistence over an extended period of time is desired. A viable alternative might be a coalition pursuing a more generic agenda whereby over time a spectrum of issues would be studied. Membership in such a coalition would be somewhat fluid and change depending upon the issue being addressed. Some groups, such as the League of Women Voters, have been successful in bridging a wide range of topics. In this pilot, the American Association of University Women was initially thought to fulfill this role locally.

In all associations, organizational maintenance activities are necessary but sometimes laborious. Because of the more tenuous nature of coalitions, such maintenance is even more critical. In the Iowa pilot, the paid coordinator served this role well. Unfortunately, a "true believer" did not emerge from the volunteers to sustain the coalition after the project ended.

Timing for coalitions. This project had an externally defined life course of less than two years. As a result, there was not a natural evolution through which interests coalesced or events occurred. Rather, participation was solicited and development of the group was forced. Conceivably, coalitions can emerge in a short period of time, certainly less than two years, but in many settings coalition development might take much longer. Deliberate manipulation of events brings with it a risk of creating an artificial environment.

At the grassroots level, cynicism can become associated with public policy forums even when they are promoted as balanced or objective. Often, there is a common belief that some hidden agenda or predetermined conclusion is a driving force. A broad-based coalition is at least a partial solution, but it is not necessarily an easy one. The energies to develop and sustain a coalition are significant.

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