

Towards co-operative governance in the development and implementation of cross-sectoral policy: Water policy as an example

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Abstract

Water, because it is so fundamental and irreplaceable to humans and their activities, is an all-pervasive issue that underpins the social fabric of every society. This means that water policy is cross-sectoral, directly and indirectly affecting and affected by almost all other sectoral policies such as agriculture, urban development, rural development, health, housing, economic development. Effective implementation of any cross-sectoral policy requires that co-operative governance processes have to be established on the ground, and not just considered as some form of laudable principle. One of the most important steps in moving towards operational co-operative governance is the identification and agreement, by all the relevant and affected sectors, on shared primary objectives. This must be followed by the development of co-ordinated implementation programmes that can effectively achieve these objectives. In this paper, we explore a possible model for initiating co-operative governance processes in cross-sectoral policy implementation, using water as an example, and discuss some of the potential applications of this model.

Keywords: water policy, co-operative governance, integrated water resource management, South Africa

Introduction

This paper arose from discussions on how to make the implementation of national water policy as effective and efficient as possible, in the face of limited capacity and expertise, limited financial resources and above all, limited water resources. Different individuals involved in the development of national water policy and in the early phase of implementation felt that the process had been and remained extremely difficult, despite broad agreement about the importance of water in the national interest. When we asked the questions: "Why was it – why is it – so difficult?" and "Why does it feel that the effort needed to implement is so enormous?", two key reasons were suggested:

- Firstly, the natural resistance to change that characterises any change process, whether at the level of an individual, an organisation or a country, seemed to create a huge inertia in both the implementing agency (the Department of Water Affairs and Forestry (DWAF)) and the stakeholders (water users). There is a large body of knowledge, mostly contained in the business management literature, regarding the management of change processes and ways of overcoming this natural resistance and inertia. The relevance of this to water policy is discussed in MacKay et al. (2003). However, we felt that resistance to change, even to a major shift such as that represented by the 1997 water policy, did not sufficiently explain people's direct experiences of the policy development and implementation processes.

- Hence the second contributing factor: Water is a cross-sectoral issue, and water policy is thus by definition cross-sectoral policy that influences and affects all levels of society. This means that achievement of water policy goals requires collaboration, co-ordination and joint effort amongst the agencies responsible for other sectoral policies that affect or are affected by water. These include agriculture, housing, urban development, rural development, health, economic development and environment, as well as many others. The lead agent for water issues, in this case DWAF, may have to overcome the net inertia of all the other sectors as well as that within the water sector, a task which can seem overwhelming at times.

At some 'higher' level, all sectoral policies ultimately overlap and are interconnected, though there are some issues that are more strongly cross-sectoral than others, for example, environment, energy, water and poverty alleviation. Effective implementation of any cross-sectoral policy requires that co-operative governance processes have to be established on the ground, and not just considered as some form of laudable principle. In this paper, we explore a possible model for initiating co-operative governance processes in cross-sectoral policy implementation, using water as an example, and discuss some of the potential applications of this model.

Background

Water in society

Biologically, humans cannot survive without water. It is as essential as oxygen to the physiology of the human being. Because water is a life-or-death issue for humans, with direct physiological consequences as well as indirect effects on food production, actual or even potential water shortages lead to significant social stress as well as physiological stress in individuals and communities. Soci-

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Received 3 July 2003; accepted in revised form 17 October 2003.