

Collaborating to Implement Spatial Approaches to Integrated Management

Background

For at least the past 40 years a number of parallel movements have been emerging in a variety of policy areas. Starting with environmental issues, the 1987 Brundtland Report established the need to consider simultaneously, or in an integrated way, important values such as the promotion of human welfare, the preservation of ecosystems, inter- and intra-generational equity, and public participation in development decision making. Known as Sustainable Development, there have been a number of attempts to address this form of integration, with limited success.

Related to this, the management of natural resources has been going through a paradigmatic shift, focusing increasingly on the need to understand the multiple effects (positive and negative) of resource use on communities and other elements of any given ecosystem. Here reference is often made to integration between a number of sectors, between disciplines and, as a result, between different government departments within and between jurisdictions. For example, reduced water availability affects the capacity of communities, different industries and ecosystems to thrive. There is, therefore, a call for a better alignment of planning and policy approaches to better account for these inter-relations. And this can occur mainly at a relevant geographical scale, bringing together all relevant actors, many of whom have a vested interest in the sustainable use of resources on which they depend.

It is in such a context that we are increasingly speaking of spatial-based approaches to planning, looking at how different pressures on the environment and human communities come together at a given geographical scale. Such a scale is difficult to define *a priori*, as it is often issue driven. Nevertheless, there are relatively new formal governance arrangements emerging, in particular for water management, to reflect the shift towards taking a spatial lens to tackle the integration of multiple dimensions to resource management. In addition, stewardship organizations developing out of community or regionally-felt needs are increasingly involved in trying to find solutions to their problems.

In social policy, and also in infrastructure development, a similar movement can be seen. There is an increasing focus on “place” as a concept or lens, often the community, as a means to better address a web of related issues. From health to immigration to fighting poverty, a number of policy challenges can in theory be addressed together by looking at them at a relevant spatial scale.

Although the spatial approach is believed to improve integration, and by extension Sustainable Development, there are many challenges to implementing such change, ranging from a culture of specialization to the difficulty in collaborating between policy areas and sectors of society - governments and stakeholders are often seen as partners in such spatial-based arrangements, sharing responsibility - to addressing jurisdictional

issues. We will briefly review some of these challenges below, before turning to the purpose of the workshop.

Challenges of Spatial Approaches to Integrated Management

A number of federal departments have been directly engaged in spatial approaches to integrated management for many years. In general, these endeavors are issue specific, and not necessarily meant to be for a long period of time. In addition, at least in the resource management sectors, there does not seem yet to be consensual views in federal departments as to what the benefits of these initiatives might have been.

The available evidence, both from federally-led initiatives and elsewhere, however suggests a number of key challenges.

Vocabulary

The notions of integration, and of space/place, in particular, can have different meanings in different policy contexts. Integration can refer to the need to bring different functions of an organization – e.g. in the federal government finances, policy-making, program planning, etc... - to better coordinate their activities. In the context of spatial-based approaches to planning, reference is generally made simultaneously to a number of needs, adding to the potential confusion: the need to better coordinate between different governmental agencies in different jurisdictions or within a jurisdiction; between disciplines; between sources and types of information; between interests/sectors; or between perceptions, attitudes and values. While all these forms of integration are inter-related, the specific challenges each form brings can lead to the development of different approaches. For example, solutions devised to address the need to integrate between different governmental agencies may not be the same as those solutions required to determine trade-offs between values. This said, there is general agreement that more collaborative approaches are needed to address integration challenges.

The notion of integration in resources management is often linked to concepts such as Integrated Landscape Management, Integrated Water Resources Management, ecosystem-based or others. We refer here to spatial-based approaches to try to convey the message that there is a common focus on delimiting the inter-relations (often biophysical) of the resource management issued being looked at. In social policy, however, the notion of place-based is more generally made in reference to space as it relates to specific socio-economic systems (such as communities). While there may be strong similarities between the two as they both focus on some concept of space, the underlying conceptions of how space is determined are different. Again, the set of challenges faced by those spatial approaches, however defined, are often very similar, as we will see below, and again require some form of collaborative approaches defined at a specific scale.

Diverse Problems, Players and Landscapes

The flexibility to tailor solutions to the problems being addressed is often seen as one of the main benefits place-based or spatial-based initiatives can offer. In many cases, this flexibility can also be challenging as each region or community may require a tailored

and unique arrangement, the success of which can be heavily dependent on the dynamic created amongst the key stakeholders and the scope of the issues that need to be resolved. In other words, there is no clear solution or approach; it needs to be crafted by those involved and often this means aligning and integrating a plethora of administratively disconnected organizations to form alliances of government departments across all levels, user groups, industry, citizens, academics and other stakeholders. Often, it is the collaboration of departments and agencies within the federal government or a provincial government that is difficult to achieve. Such a broad diversity of interests, sometimes in conflict, requires finding some common denominator for constructive processes.

Jurisdictional Issues

Landscapes, watersheds or ocean shores rarely align neatly with jurisdictional boundaries, making spatially-based integrated strategies particularly difficult to develop and implement. In cases where the issue at hand reaches across provincial and international boundaries there is the potential for complexity due to the different regulatory frameworks and data/monitoring regimes that each province provides as well as the dynamic that each province has created with its stakeholders.

Beyond geography, the provinces and territories may have the authority to make many of the resource management decisions. In many cases, however, federal departments have strong mandates and responsibilities linked to some aspects of resource management, such as in the protection of fish habitat or pollution control, or for the management of international aspects of resource management.

Lack of Information

The lack of information is often one of the most limiting factors to making sound decisions. Throughout Canada, there are serious gaps in knowledge that impede effective resource management. In many cases, informed decisions can not be made due to a lack of data and monitoring.

A forum or mechanism for sharing best practices is also lacking. Information regarding spatially-based approaches that have led to successful (and unsuccessful) outcomes can be a valuable resource to other similar initiatives – especially considering that such practices are still relatively new. Lessons learned from the more mature initiatives could provide up-and-coming ones with the much needed guidance and momentum to construct their own approach.

Culture

Underlying most of these issues are the need for a range of actors, in particular within government, to collaborate more and better. A recent event led by the Public Policy Forum and the Policy Research Initiative examined some of the barriers to such collaboration. Among the obstacles, experts identified the culture of the public service as too often risk-averse, stifling innovative, flexible policymaking and delivery. It was also felt that the federal government is often a top-down manager of its partners, which is antithetical to a non-hierarchical spirit of collaboration.

“There was also concern expressed that Canada’s Westminster institutions, in which authority and accountability are arranged vertically, are poorly-suited to horizontal collaboration. Moreover, increasing scrutiny of the public purse by the media and public and the rigid accountability regime that is emerging are real obstacles to greater collaboration” (Gravelle et al., 2008: 5).

Looking Forward

Considering both the promises and the challenges of spatial-based and place-based approaches to integrated management, a number of federal organizations are partnering to organize this workshop and bring together practitioners and policy-makers to consider collectively: what has been done to date, what have been the main benefits and challenges for the federal government.

In particular, it is expected that participants will help identify the most important benefits and challenges of spatial-based approaches, with a view to begin concentrating attention on potential solutions to addressing some of those main challenges.

An important side benefit of this work is that participants will have a unique and needed opportunity, through dialogue, to learn more about each other’s perspectives on an important emerging issue. It is hoped that this can lead to more collaboration.

Sources

Matthew Gravelle and Katherine Baird and Ian Green, May 2008, *Collaborative Governance and Changing Federal Roles*, , A PPF and PRI Joint Roundtable Outcomes Report.

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