

Exploring Catchment Partnerships



Kerry Waylen, Keith Marshall, Alba Juarez-Bourke & Kirsty Blackstock, April 2021

Kerry.Waylen@hutton.ac.uk

What is a catchment partnership?

Catchment partnerships are initiatives that involve multiple organisational partners, located within a biophysical freshwater (sub)catchment. These partners come together voluntarily for mutual advantage, to agree and implement shared objectives, particularly in relation to managing water quality and quantity issues. Partnerships are thus the creation of a new institution, which may be formalised as a single legal entity but, more often, are formalised agreements between organisations to work together. These partnerships – also called watershed partnerships or water basin partnerships – can be found across the world.

Why are catchment partnerships interesting?

Various scholars, practitioners and policy makers have voiced many hopes for catchment partnerships, including:

- To help deliver multiple benefits and policy goals, particularly in relation to the Water Framework Directive (WFD) and Flood Directive (FD).
- To help connect top-down and bottom-up governance processes.
- To help enrol multiple sectors (and their resources), including private sector partners.

It is often thought that partnerships may make better progress towards these goals than single organisations, or than other approaches to governing catchments. But there is need to check if these aspirations and assumptions are reflected by what happens in practice.

Who should be interested in these partnerships?

We think this subject is interesting to a wide mix of scholars, policy-makers and practitioners:

- Practitioners directly seeking to improve water environment, e.g. those involved in England's Catchment Based Approach (CaBA), those implementing River Basin Management Plans (RBMPs) and Flood Risk Management Plans (FRMPs).
- Those doing or enabling other types of landscape partnership, e.g. anything from Landscape Enterprise Networks (LENS) through to Scotland's Regional Land Use Partnerships (RLUPs).
- Academics who seek to understand the role and potential of collaboration within complex multi-level governance arrangements, where pre-existing regulations and evolving funding priorities interact. Partnerships can be seen as an example of multi-level and polycentric governance processes in action.

How did we study catchment partnerships?

We studied 4 catchment partnerships in the UK (Hampshire Avon Catchment Partnership, Poole Harbour Catchment Initiative, Dee Catchment Partnership and Spey Catchment Initiative). We collected data from existing public catchment plans and other publicly available documents, followed by interviews with representatives of catchment partners and their coordinators. We carried out qualitative thematic analysis of this secondary and primary data, informed by the

literature on environmental governance, collective action and policy implementation. This research received clearance from the James Hutton Institute ethics committee and was carried out in compliance with GDPR.

What were catchment partnerships good for?

Those we interviewed felt that partnerships were worthwhile for bringing different viewpoints and organisations together, and to identify and achieve shared or overlapping objectives, which may evolve over time. The especial value of partnership working was for:

- Making progress with tricky complex actions - especially Natural Flood Management (NFM) and diffuse pollution – whose delivery depend on multiple organisations or individuals.
- Sharing knowledge of all sorts across organisations – not only formal data sets but also knowledge about sites and problems, individuals and processes within organisations.
- Combining or integrating different goals, albeit within the environment and flooding domains.
- Connecting and potentially resolving bottom up and top down priorities and processes.

What allows catchment partnerships to make a difference?

There is no single recipe for a successful partnership, but in our sample the following were key in enabling partnerships to be successful:

- Coordinators – these must be perceived to be independent (i.e. not biased towards any particular partner) and with expertise both in the landscape and topics of concern.
- Funding – planning processes require financial resources and implementing those plans uses even more. Thus, real change cannot be achieved without accessing funds from partners or other sources (usually public sector funding for environmental policy goals).
- Diversity of partners – this allows the strengths of different sectors to be combined. In our sample, private sector organisations were not often involved, but were valued where they were active, for their additional resources and expertise.
- Allowing evolution and adaption – all partnerships need to reflect changes in policies, the catchment and the partnership itself. Evolution over time may involve the composition, structure, focus and processes of a partnership.

Why is partnership working like a balancing act?

Successful partnership work depends on a constant balancing act: not only between different objectives such as water quality and quantity, but also between many options and opportunities, such as planning easy actions as well as ‘tricky’ actions; questioning how far to focus on steering the partnership versus delivery of actions; how much to formally document planning and evaluation; how much to invest in existing relationships and networks versus making connections with new potential partners or stakeholder groups.

It is important to note that although we talk about partnerships as involving organisations, in practice it is individuals representing organisations whose skills and interactions are critical to this balancing act. The role of the coordinator is central to these interactions. Although coordinators often have ecological expertise, their role depends on abilities in organising, coordinating, communicating and liaising with other individuals. Such dynamics are not always evident in catchment management plans, but underpin any partnership achievements.

What were the challenges experienced by catchment partnerships?

Partnerships are often seen as a means of going beyond what single organisations or existing policy processes can achieve: but paradoxically, individual organisations and policy processes are critical to enabling partnerships to achieve additional outcomes.

- It takes time to identify and commit to plans that go beyond what individual organisations already have in place.
- The funding used to implement plans is often provided in support of specific policy goals: such funding structures can make it hard to justify interventions that would deliver multiple benefits, in support of integrated ambitious visions.
- Public sector austerity and short-term budget cycles can make it increasingly difficult to maintain funding for coordinators.
- It is difficult to prove what has been achieved due to a partnership itself, rather than what would have happened anyway by partners acting alone.
- Obscure or unclear routes for allowing lessons learnt within partnerships to feed back into national policy making processes.

Partnerships need to adapt, yet they should not try to incorporate everything and everyone - for example, in our sample there was limited direct engagement with climate change, spatial planning or infrastructure domains – if partnerships were to expand to consider all these it might jeopardise their existing strengths.

What are the implications for partnerships?

- Value and resource the role of coordinators and their important activities that support communication and networking between individual representatives.
- Recognise that adaptation is normally needed – and explicitly plan for this. As well as reflecting on the activities needed to achieve previously agreed goals, encourage procedural reflection i.e. on how the partnership is organised, the mix of partners, the goals of the partnership.
- Decide if a partnership will focus on steering – i.e. shaping and setting new goals - or also steering-and-delivery i.e. also taking responsibility for delivery of activities. Partnerships vary in the extent to which they focus on delivery, and may vary in this over time.

What are the implications for policy and those enabling partnerships?

- Provide resources for coordinators, not only the 'on the ground' activities of partnerships.
- Continue to support funding schemes to enable the delivery of activities that provide multiple goals.
- Provide resources and mandate for learning and reflection by the partnership (in line with monitoring and evaluation for adaptive management).
- Establish effective channels for sharing partnership learning to help inform implementation and any future changes of WFD & FD policies, in support of adaptive governance.

What are the implications for researchers?

- Scholars of environmental governance need to see it as a social and relational process, carried out by individuals coping with trade-offs and multiple constraints. Learning about their expertise and experiences is centrally important and will help to understand the potential of voluntary collective approaches in an institutional landscape that is already crowded and shaped by the legacy of governing via regulatory approaches.

- Given finite resources and the multiple vested reasons why acknowledging the need for change can be difficult, more work is needed to understand the ‘right’ balance of effort to enable adaptive management and adaptive governance.
- Private sector involvement in partnerships is much talked of but not yet widespread. It would be useful to understand diversity of private sector actors (from landowners through to multi-nationals, and from those at all points in relevant supply chains), their reasons for involvement, and how they might influence partnerships.
- It would be useful to test the extent to which insights from catchment partnerships are shared by other types of partnerships. We may expect that other partnerships face additional challenges from needing to define geographic and remit boundaries.

What can I do to find out more?

A full report on this work is available from www.hutton.ac.uk/research/projects/waterintegration. In 2021 we are preparing academic publications based on this work, and we will be organising virtual discussion on some of these issues. To find out more Email Kerry.Waylen@Hutton.ac.uk.

Images from of the four catchments partnerships studied by our research.



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