

ALTERNATIVES TO CONSENSUS DECISION-MAKING IN AOTEAROA NEW ZEALAND'S FRESHWATER COLLABORATIONS

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Presentation Aims

- 1 – Illustrate that consensus decision-making is a feature of collaborative governance in general, and is central to the New Zealand model of freshwater collaboration.
- 2 – Argue that consensus decision-making has some benefits but there are also substantial drawbacks. In the New Zealand context, one significant drawback is that consensus decision-making excludes radical voices from the collaboration.
- 3 – Present some alternatives which allow for constructive dissensus within a broad collaborative framework.



What is collaboration?

- According to Ansell and Gash (2008: 543), collaborative governance is a mode “of governance [that] brings multiple stakeholders together in common forums with public agencies to engage in **consensus-oriented** decision making”.
- 1 – Collaboration is initiated by public agencies to help resolve policy issues
- 2 – Nonstate actors are included as collaborators
- 3 – Collaborators directly engage in decision making
- 4 – The collaboration is formally organised and meets regularly
- 5 – The collaboration makes decisions **through consensus**.
- “If and when consensus is achieved...the benefit is greater acceptability of and commitment to the decision by all those concerned (Choi and Robertson, 2014, p.498).”

Issues with consensus decision making

Positives

- 1 – Greater commitment by all stakeholders to uphold the final decision
- 2 - Trust building and social learning

Negatives

- 1 – Exclusion of radical voices
- 2 – Affects the scope of decision made
- 3 – No recourse if consensus recommendations are partially executed
- 4 – Agenda setting by powerful interest groups



The New Zealand model of freshwater collaboration

- Collaborations offer recommendations to local governments on rules and regulations for freshwater use. All New Zealand freshwater collaborations use consensus decision-making in creating these recommendations.
- Most collaborations ensure explicit local government and Māori representation and implicit representation of sectoral interests (e.g. farmers, hydro-electricity companies) and conservation interests.
- In some collaborations community members are asked to be non-representative in order to help achieve compromise and consensus.
- Collaborators are selected by local governments, usually after advertising for expressions of interest. In some examples collaborators are chosen explicitly for their ability to reach compromise and consensus.
- Collaboration is presented as an alternative to adversarialism. The New Zealand model of collaboration does not deny conflicts, but argues that these can be reduced by the collaborative process.

To achieve consensus, New Zealand freshwater collaborations decide that some people are capable of participating in a collaborative policy process, and some are not capable.

Broad-based inclusion of different stakeholders is, in part, how collaborations achieve legitimacy (Ansell and Gash, 2008, p.556). Inclusion also strengthens the claim that policy devised represents a broad consensus.

My argument is that in the New Zealand context, legitimacy for collaborations is weakened by the exclusion of radical voices.



Research question

- So, what alternatives are there? How can we retain the social learning and commitment to policy compliance which are established by collaborations, while also ensuring a constructive adversarialism where all perspectives and opinions on a topic are welcome?



Potential alternatives

- “Dialogue between masks” – Muzza Irrigation Canal (Ricart *et al.* 2018).
 - Water Alliance of 64 key stakeholders established to manage the Muzza Canal, an irrigation canal in Northern Italy.
 - A need to abandon previous stereotypes and prejudices between different members, such as farmers, water user association, reclamation authorities, environmental NGOs etc.
 - ‘Dialogue between masks’ trialed in which stakeholders all wore a Greek theatre mask to debate canal management without resorting to stereotypes.
 - Process established rules for the water alliance: freedom of expression and legitimacy of all opinions; validations of contributions regardless of the role they represent; obligation to put yourself in one another’s shoes; transforming opposing demands into practical proposals.



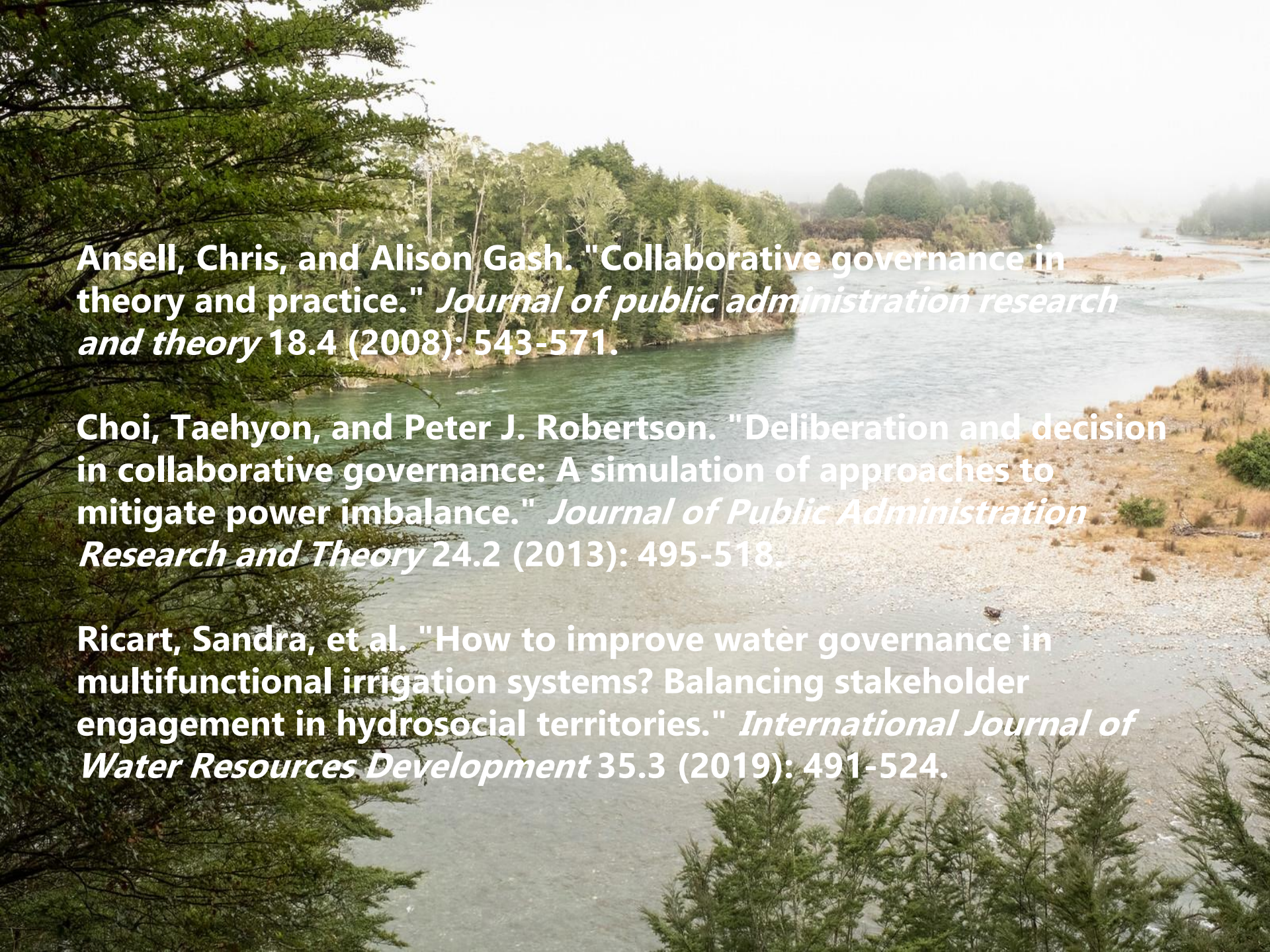
Potential alternatives

- Supermajority decisions – Sacramento Area Water Forum (Connick 2006)
 - The water forum members were split into different ‘caucuses’ (Public interests such as local government; environmental interests; Sacramento water interests; Business interests; Foothill water interests)
 - Within each caucus, a three-quarter majority would be required for an issue to be supported by the caucus as a whole.
 - For an item to be adopted by the Water Forum as a whole, it required the support of each caucus.
 - This alternative allows different interests to express themselves, however, it also creates a process which allows a broad (but not overwhelming) consensus to be reached.



Conclusion and questions for future research

- There are practical alternatives to consensus-decision making in collaborative processes which could retain the benefits of consensus decision-making, such as social learning.
- Future research ought to investigate if collaborative governance can develop mechanisms which learn from Māori methods of dialogue and collective work (e.g. mahi tahi, ngā tahi)? Can we develop a model of collaboration specific to Aotearoa New Zealand?
- Can consensus decision-making be decoupled from collaborative governance, or is it a central feature of all collaboration?



Ansell, Chris, and Alison Gash. "Collaborative governance in theory and practice." *Journal of public administration research and theory* 18.4 (2008): 543-571.

Choi, Taehyon, and Peter J. Robertson. "Deliberation and decision in collaborative governance: A simulation of approaches to mitigate power imbalance." *Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory* 24.2 (2013): 495-518.

Ricart, Sandra, et al. "How to improve water governance in multifunctional irrigation systems? Balancing stakeholder engagement in hydrosocial territories." *International Journal of Water Resources Development* 35.3 (2019): 491-524.