



Trust build up and break down between stakeholders in water resource management

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Trust is a word that is often heard in discussions about stakeholder participation in water management programmes and projects. A break down in trust between participants is often attributed to the failure of a project reaching its objectives. In contrast, the development of trust is often described as a success in itself, and is thought to lead to positive water management outcomes. To explore how trust impacts water management, this research explores the factors that led to trust development and break-down, and the implications of this, in a major stakeholder engagement project in water management in North America.

A major review of the Lake Ontario and St Lawrence River water level operating system (the LOSL Study) was commissioned in 1999 by the International Joint Commission (IJC). The goal of the five-year LOSL Study was to produce an operating policy for the system that was acceptable to everyone impacted by the water levels and flows in the basin. Through public meetings and consultations, the Study aimed to bring together and combine public and scientist input to co-produce an operating policy that met the needs of all interest groups. Freely accessible documentation of the public involvement activities that took place is available, which is used to explore trust and mistrust development. Provisional findings show that some public/interest group representatives mistrusted the Study. This was related to concerns over data quality, whether appropriate indicators were selected by the researchers and whether the models used were producing accurate outputs. Scientist responses to questions at public meetings were able to address some of these concerns and therefore build trust in the methods, but could also lead to further mistrust if public concerns and questions were not addressed adequately (for example, simply dismissed as irrelevant by scientists without due explanation). The impacts of distrust between participants and scientists included apathy and low participant engagement and failure of some interest groups to accept the findings and recommendations produced by the study. An acceptable operating policy is yet to be identified by the IJC. Future work will explore how the empirical evidence from the LOSL study supports some of the theoretically expected benefits of trust (raised efficiency of cooperation because less time and resources are spent monitoring the actions of others, free and open dialogue that leads to more creative solutions, and greater acceptance of decisions and more efficient implementation of an agreed plan).