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BUILDING A COALITION FOR EDUCATING ON WATER POLICY

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In addition to the Kellogg Foundation and Farm Foundation, I want to acknowledge the Regional Rural Development Centers' role in fostering this project. The centers supported several meetings of a working group in 1987 to explore social science opportunities in groundwater quality issues that led to development of the project. Also, I wish to acknowledge George Goldman, Verne House and Alan Epps for their contributions to the project.

Combining differing perspectives and approaches of organizations into a coalition has the potential for enhancing our policy education efforts. But how should we build and maintain such coalitions? Reflecting on the "Groundwater Policy Education Project," I will provide some answers to this question.

A Coalition for Water Quality Education

The coalition funded by Kellogg consists of the Freshwater Foundation, Soil and Water Conservation Society, and Cooperative Extension in seven states. To begin with, the working group mentioned earlier initiated the idea of developing a proposal to Kellogg. We then approached the Freshwater Foundation and Soil and Water Conservation Society, which we knew had strong interests in rural groundwater issues and had done work on policy concerns. As you might expect, initial discussions centered around what might be gained from a cooperative approach. We suggested three areas of possible mutual interest and benefits.

Objectivity

The lack of objective information and balanced forums for discussion was perceived as a key obstacle to effective communication about groundwater quality issues. Through coalition-building and the use of public policy education methods, it was felt this barrier could be overcome and the credibility of coalition members increased.

Institutions

Most existing water quality education programs provide technical information about water-related choices to individual producers and consumers. Yet the locus for water quality decision making is moving from the individual level to the institutional level. Given these changes, educators must help audiences understand the probable impacts of changes in institutions or the policy rules that define participants' opportunities and constraints. To accomplish this, greater appreciation and understanding of relationships among institutions, participants' behaviors, and policy outcomes is needed.

Information Support Base

The groundwater issue challenges our current information generation and delivery system. Threats to contamination are pervasive and groundwater characteristics affecting vulnerability vary by locale. Existing governmental programs focused on environmental media or specific problems make comprehensive management difficult (National Research Council). In addition, part of the information needed for decision-making (e.g. toxicology) typically is not located within the land grant system. Despite numerous knowledge gaps and extensive organizational and disciplinary fragmentation, concerned publics are placing demands on policy makers to protect groundwater. Since the quality of decisions depends on better linkages and coordination among agencies generating information, the project had the potential for drawing together information of use in state and local policy making.

Coalition Building

We don't pretend to have a magic formula for developing coalitions, but we believe that we did at least a few things right. Discussions with coalition members began by laying out our basic interests in the project described by the three benefits above. Only after discussing mutual interests and goals did we discuss in detail how the project might be organized and structured.

Why do I say we did at least a few things right? In addition to the fact that our coalition is still viable, the steps we took are somewhat parallel to basic principles from negotiation theory. Fisher and Ury suggest that early negotiations should focus on basic interests of the parties, not on specific positions and the generation of a variety of alternative options. This method "permits you to reach a goal on a decision efficiently without all the transactional costs of digging into positions only having to dig yourself out of them" (p. 14).

Project Goals and Methods

Our project's primary goal is to increase local capacity for address-

ing groundwater quality issues. Through programs planned by coalitions, we wish to facilitate a broader or enlarged view of groundwater quality issues and possible solutions. A critical, but often overlooked, need in a democracy is for educational forums in which people can increase their understanding of situations on other sides of a particular issue (Hahn). Secondly, the project will attempt to increase resources, primarily information, available to state and local decision makers. A third objective is to produce more informed and thus "better" groundwater management decisions.

Focus

The project focuses on policy issues related to the management of rural groundwater supplies. Programs will be broadly based and include topics such as agricultural and nonagricultural pesticide and fertilizer use, solid waste disposal, underground storage tanks and septic tanks. Primary audiences are government officials, representatives of groups interested in rural groundwater issues, and citizens at the local and state level.

Procedures

The project lasts three years and has three stages. The project's steering committee consists of representatives from the Freshwater Foundation and Soil and Water Conservation Society and Cooperative Extension in the seven participating states. The Freshwater Foundation and Soil and Water Conservation Society are represented on this committee by Linda Schroeder and Tony Vrana, respectively.

In the first stage, the project's steering committee is developing a comprehensive set of educational materials on groundwater management and policy. The following four products have been defined: a special issue of the *Journal of Soil and Water Conservation (JSWC)*, a set of educational leaflets, a handbook for use by the educational program leader, and a bibliography. The project's steering committee has been working with key federal organizations and agencies to define these materials and existing resources. Articles in a March/April 1990 special JSWC issue entitled "Rural Groundwater Quality Management: Emerging Issues and Public Policies for the 1990s" will serve as basis for many of the leaflets. The four subject matter areas of the leaflets are: the groundwater quality problem, management practices, the policy process and policy alternatives and consequences. The handbook has been divided into three areas. David Allee, Cornell University, is developing the public policy education methodology section and Leon Danielson, North Carolina State University, is working on the technical information section. The policy alternatives and consequences component is being completed at Penn State.

The second stage of the project, which will begin in spring, 1990, will entail the piloting of the project's materials in seven states. In addition to David Allee, Leon Danielson and me, the following individuals will lead projects: Tim Wallace, California; Roy Carriker, Florida; Steven Padgitt, Iowa; and Doug Yanggen, Wisconsin. A leadership workshop, hosted by the Freshwater Foundation, is planned for spring, 1990, to introduce the materials to representatives from state coalitions. The pilot project leaders will work with agencies and organizations to plan and implement programs using the materials in 1990 and 1991.

In the project's third stage, the experiences and impacts of the seven states will be compared and recommendations developed for changes in educational materials. It is expected that the resulting products will eventually be available for use nationwide.

Challenges

Interest

As concern about groundwater quality increased in the 1980s, demands for information on groundwater issues have grown. While opportunities for educators are abundant, the expanding interest presents a challenge as well. Research, educational and policy activity is occurring at a rapid pace and a wide variety of organizations are involved. Early in the project, we were overwhelmed by the extent of these efforts. We eventually gained confidence that we were on top of the major activities and that the project had a unique niche with its focus on state and local groundwater management and policy.

Fragmentation

As noted, disciplinary and organizational fragmentation are barriers to providing groundwater information to state and local decision makers. The degree of fragmentation suggested that we should involve a wide variety of expertise and disciplines to address the complexity of groundwater issues. To bridge some of the gaps we have utilized an informal group of representatives from Washington, D.C.-based agencies (e.g. United States Department of Agriculture, United States Environmental Protection Agency, United States Geological Survey) and organizations representing groups having a stake in rural groundwater issues.

Organizational Change

When listening to people discuss successful interdisciplinary or other joint projects, the role of the personal relationships is often cited as a critical factor. Coalition projects are no different. The

“glue that makes them stick” together is in large part the rapport and trust which accumulates as the people representing the organizations get to know one another and develop working relationships. Organizational change presents a challenge to the viability of coalitions. When individuals representing participating organizations leave, coalition relationships become less stable and the project loses momentum. Members must make new investments to restore the coalition and bring a project back to its former productivity level. Organizational change has been a factor that has definitely affected our project. From January, 1988, when the project was initially proposed, to September, 1989, four of ten representatives to our steering committee changed.

Differences Among States

Due to an interest in the usefulness of our methods, we are devoting much attention to implementation in the seven pilot states. While states differ in their problems and policy approaches, we need to have enough structure so that we can compare the results. The considerable differences existing among state extension organizations, including pilot leaders' responsibilities within their systems, are factors that contribute to the difficulty of assessing the effectiveness of a set of educational materials and methods.

Communication About Policy

Other organizations that share an interest in educational, not advocacy, approaches are working on water quality as well as other issues of concern to extension. In addition, technically oriented faculty and staff are often frustrated when dealing with the increasingly controversial nature of their subject matter. Due to investments and experience, policy educators have a useful set of concepts and tools that can enrich the efforts of these groups. There are many reasons why collaboration with nonextension organizations and technical extension staff in policy education efforts do not occur. Based on experiences in this project, I believe that miscommunication about policy education can be a significant barrier. Once a mutual understanding of the definition and goals of public policy education is established, ideas and information seem to flow more freely. One of things we can do to foster the development of educational coalitions is to devise new and more effective ways of communicating about public policy education.

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