

KEY TAKEAWAYS & RESOURCES:

Drivers of Local Policy Change and the Role of Technical Assistance

This document is a summary of takeaways that could be useful to practitioners and researchers interested in this topic, especially as applied to the Seacoast region of New Hampshire. Generated from “Learning Circle #5,” organized by the [Bridging Human Dimensions Project](#). Additional shared project files [are available at this link](#).

Practitioner Context & Challenges

- ★ Local water quality-oriented policy and practice changes are influenced by many factors. What are the **primary drivers of better policies and practices**?
- ★ Technical assistance plays a role in informing local decision making around water quality. **What approaches to technical assistance may be most productive?**
- ★ How **can research informed approaches** to technical assistance **improve municipal staff adoption** of better policies and practices?
- ★ **How does science inform decision making and policy?** How can technical research and social research come together to support communities? How does translation/implementation happen?
- ★ **What are the best ways to encourage community engagement for planning projects** or other times when there is not a “captive audience” or sense of urgency? How can we bring additional folks into the process (not just those typically involved or particularly angry)?
- ★ Practitioners appreciate learning about efforts that didn’t work and thoughtful discussions about how to pivot and move forward. **Practitioners need venues for safely sharing stories of community efforts and projects that did not go as planned.**

Key Takeaways

Lessons for providing TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE to community leaders:

- The **quality of collaboration is one key to success.**
 - Engagement should build from identified needs
 - Communities have many simultaneous and interrelated needs. Bringing multiple types of expertise and perspectives to the table is likely to result in more buy-in and likely to require more trade-offs.
 - Collaborative projects take time and relationship building. Expect twists and turns.
 - If you go in with a finished product/polished recommendation you might be missing opportunities for co-development and innovation. For example, with the [City of Dover Berry Brook Project](#), although there were disagreements initially, the process helped open up concepts for more creative designs.
 - Coordination among municipal entities is often lacking but helps build cooperation for other overlapping projects. *This refers to a follow up project from [Tides to Storms](#).*
- There are **multiple steps between creating new knowledge and seeing it applied.**
 - Social science frameworks, like *Diffusion of Innovation*, can transform how we think about this process and promote patience with communities and local governments.
 - Different skill sets and activities are required to curate this process. Social science can inform this process so that successful application and implementation are more likely.
 - Having science applied to policy decision-making involves much more than disseminating results. Policy change occurs within a complicated community context.
 - Many factors affect decision making around the implementation of the scientific data toward a policy change. It is important for technical assistants to be aware of the backdrop and consider if policy

change is even feasible. [Moving from research to municipal decision making to action is complex](#) and social science can help elucidate the factors influencing these pathways.

- **Technical assistance requires skill, sensitivity, flexibility, and trust.**
 - Technical assistance providers are often asked to interpret the science AND be the outreach and engagement specialist. For technical providers to be effective in that role, community trust and relationships must be in place. Tech assistance providers need to trust the sources of the technical and social science information that they are using.
 - Flexibility is critical for working with communities on applying technical info. The process is not linear.
 - Many technical assistance providers cannot advocate for particular policy solutions. They can only provide education, information, or data summaries about options.
 - Not all technical assistance providers see the need, or have the flexibility, to engage in the co-development, use, and application of the technical tools and knowledge. This can limit the ability to build the trust necessary to advance clean water goals in communities.

Lessons for COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT of residents to support water quality protection

- **Community engagement can support technical assistance and policy change.**
 - Even excellent engagement with community decision makers and key parties may not be enough to enable change. Residents need a chance to grapple with policy options and ask questions.
 - Resident involvement needs to include more than select resident committee members.
 - Clear communication about proposed regulatory changes, including the limitations of those changes, is important for garnering acceptance of those changes.
 - Preliminary outreach can help introduce community discussion, but identifying and selecting solutions will require additional technical, social, and economic resources.
- **Community engagement takes time, energy and outreach expertise to realize broad support for policy change.**
 - Communication and outreach with community members needs to be ongoing through the lifecycle of the effort because individual levels of involvement will vary widely.
 - Change at the community level is hard! Reaching residents is challenging even when there has been a lot of outreach. This is especially true in large communities where resistance or opposition may feel more anonymous on the part of those objecting.
 - Even a small amount of mistrust can disrupt a lot of work in a community. Inaccuracies or misleading statements need to be addressed and corrected quickly.
 - Collaborating with town administrators can sometimes build greater public involvement.
 - Timing matters. Consider engaging nodes of influence AND opposition early on.
- **ENGAGED RESEARCH: Community-based research needs to be managed to maximize real world benefits and applicability.**
 - Community-based work takes more time and resources than one may expect, especially for communication and planning.
 - Some members of the social science research community are more interested in engaged research and/or engagement processes and want their work to be embedded in the community.
 - One example of communities collecting their own data is [Downtowns and Trails \(blueways or greenways\) Project](#). The data collection activities (e.g., surveys, interviews, spatial analysis with phones) were designed to help initiative members move toward coordinated action. The research team developed scenarios based on input that initiative participants could trust and react to.

- Strict adherence to knowledge co-production tenets may not be necessary where strong and trusting relationships already exist among community and technical assistance providers.
- **Engaged research can take surprising twists and turns**
 - Projects may identify unexpected needs where researchers do not have capacity, interest or expertise. Researchers and engagement specialists need to be ready to pivot or put communities in contact with technical assistance providers who can help.
 - Sometimes big events (e.g. storms, pandemics) can catalyze municipal action and investment, especially to address the effects of those big events.

THE USE OF SOCIAL SCIENCE TOOLS FOR ENGAGEMENT

- **Local knowledge and local perspectives need to be respected and understood** when conducting engaged research with communities.
 - Using a variety of respectful methods to gather new local knowledge and perspectives is very important for engaged research.
 - Recognizing existing knowledge and involvement already underway is also really important.
- **Social science research and community engagement are two different, but inter-related things.**
 - They are separate but can inform each other. Some researchers/partners may mistakenly conflate the two, despite serving two different functions.
 - Social science tools (e.g. focus groups, surveys, interviews, etc.) can be used for either purpose. It's just important to know the difference, communicate the intention, and have the skills to use the tools correctly.
 - *For more related discussion – see [Learning Circle 1](#) and [NOAA Office for Coastal Management Social Science Basics for Coastal Managers Course](#).*

MEASURING SUCCESS

- In Learning Circle 2 [Miranda \(FM3\)](#) provided an example of different types of “success/progress”, e.g. where greater awareness of the issues resulted from residents who are resistant to change participating in polling.
- Project goals can be aspirational. We also learn when we have to step back, pivot, or modify as necessary. We can learn from projects that don't go as planned. Maintain aspirations, and modify as needed. Aim for the long game and make incremental progress.

Additional examples, related studies, and resources of potential interest:

- Building scenarios for ecosystem services tools: Developing a methodology for efficient engagement with expert stakeholders ([Berg et al 2016](#))
 - “A digitally distributed questionnaire aids in expert stakeholder participation.”
- Examining the ecosystem service of nutrient removal in a coastal watershed ([Berg et al 2016](#))
 - “Even with a free tool [...], modeling requires knowledge, resources and time. For single issues [...] decision makers may be best suited by contracting for modeling expertise.”
- Strengthening Connections: Downtowns & Trails - Hopkinton-Contoocook ([Rogers, 2023](#))
 - Collaborative project using social science methods to inform engagement
- Evaluating Collaborative Environmental Planning Outputs and Outcomes ([Mandarano, 2008](#)).
 - The research recommends that to increase the likelihood of creating social AND environmental change, collaborative planning processes need BOTH high quality outputs (i.e. products) and high quality processes for co-learning.
- Presentation/Panel Discussion on Linking Research to Decision Making ([Houle](#) -2 hrs)

- o Choosing to adopt a new practice is different than being aware of a new practice. Diffusion of Innovation is a framework that can help practitioners have reasonable expectations regarding who and how many will adopt a new practice
- Understanding stakeholder preferences for flood adaptation alternatives with natural capital implications ([Loos and Rogers 2016](#)).
 - o A multicriteria framework for decision making can be a useful way to capture utility values from interested groups with various preferences, perspectives, and values.
- Facilitating use of climate information for adaptation actions in small coastal communities. [Levesque et al 2021](#)).
 - o Highly engaged co-production may not be necessary where trust already exists, but context specific implementation assistance remains important (particularly in small towns).
- Lessons from bright-spots for advancing knowledge exchange at the interface of marine science and policy ([Karcher, et al. 2022](#)).
 - o Key attributes of successful knowledge exchange include being initiated by boundary orgs and/or practitioners; being based in management agencies or advisory groups and using iterative processes that engage with experience based knowledge holders; including co-production elements; embracing broad definitions of success; building and maintaining trust and long term relationships.
- Additional [summaries of these papers can be found here](#).

Featured Practitioners and Researchers

Thank you to the following individuals who were part of the Learning Circle that informed this summary:

- [Jennifer Rowden](#) - Land Use Program Manager, Rockingham Planning Commission
- [Dr. Vanessa Levesque](#) - University of Southern Maine Professor
- [Abigail Lyon](#) - Community Engagement Manager, Piscataqua Region Estuaries Partnership
- [Dr. Jamie Houle](#) - UNH Stormwater Center Director
- [Dr. Shannon Rogers](#) - UNH Extension State Specialist and Professor

Project Resources, Contacts, and Feedback: We appreciate your interest in this project and welcome additional questions or ideas for resources that would be useful. In addition, we appreciate hearing feedback on how you may have used this takeaway summary. Please contact Lindsey.Williams@unh.edu.

- A more detailed summary of this Learning Circle discussion [is available at this link](#). Additional shared project files [are available at this link](#).
- Additional takeaway summaries are available on the following topics:
 - o Learning Circle 1: [Conceptual Frameworks for Motivating Behavior Change](#)
 - o Learning Circle 2: [Documenting Public Opinion to Guide Programs & Influence Policy](#)
 - o Learning Circle 3: [Understanding and Building Loyalty Among Visitors and Volunteers](#)
 - o Learning Circle 4: [Social Science For Communications and Messaging](#)
- A listing of academic research papers, data sources, and other resources [is available at this link](#).

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