

#RIPPLE EFFECT: NETWORKS AS POLICY INFLUENCERS

Creating good policies for environmental governance, particularly water, is difficult as it's broad, crosses many jurisdictions, and often siloed. Policy making often results in fragmented policies, sometimes disconnected from local knowledge and practice.

Policy development in spaces beyond formal policy spaces – such as government or academic spaces – can offer more holistic and nuanced positions on environmental governance. Networks made up of members from diverse locations, backgrounds, and roles can bridge the gap in environmental policy-making.

This Policy Brief draws on the author's dissertation on a study of an intentional network built around water policy in British Columbia, Canada. In analyzing some of the history and success factors, the study has revealed the benefits of engaging in policy interfaces beyond the traditional to develop more holistic and widely accepted environmental governance policies.

Context

The POLIS Water Leaders Network is a strategically convened network made up of a group of specialists across different sectors, brought together to collaborate on holistic watershed management and policies in the province. Participants included leaders of environmental NGOs, academic researchers, policy advocates, Indigenous leaders, and practitioners from across British Columbia who are interested in watershed governance.

Discussions on watershed policies also addressed relevant issues around it - including land use planning, forestry, fisheries, and Indigenous reconciliation. These diverse perspectives enabled more nuanced analysis of policy proposals, built public support, and contributed to more holistic decisions affecting water and related land-use issues.

PRACTITIONERS MATTER

Through a network map analysis of network members by roles, geographies, and expertise, diversity can be found within the relatively small group. While non-profit organizations make up the largest category overall, sorting by topic specialization and interpersonal relationships (figure 2) reveals a more nuanced perspective. These maps show how members are connected not just by sector, but through overlapping policy interests and areas of expertise.

As these practitioners are rooted in the communities in which they serve, insights from their lived experiences and relevant on-the-ground knowledge provided additional value into discussions on watershed governance. These maps show how policy discussions on watershed management are enriched through a diversity of background and experience, beyond formal policy environments where policy discussions are usually taking place.

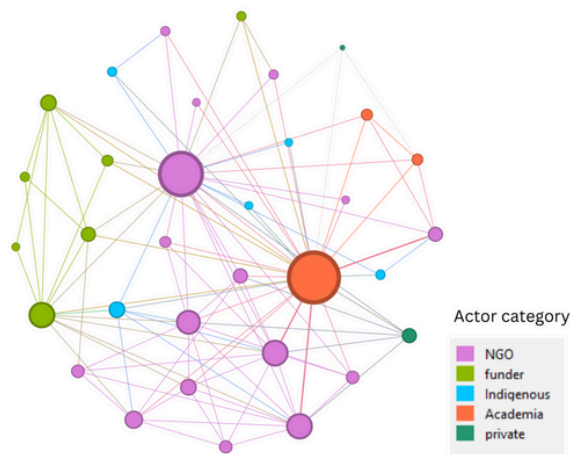
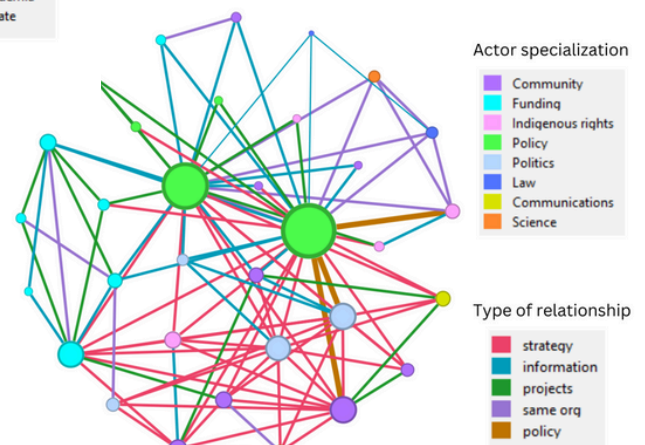


Figure 1. Network map based on actor categories

Figure 2. Network map based on the topic specialization of each actor and their relationship with one another.



LOCATION, LOCATION, LOCATION

Policymakers and bureaucrats are often concentrated in capital cities or large metropolitan areas, but environmental policies need to consider the entire geographic area in which they represent. Through a geographical map of actors and their roles, the network maps show how the engagement of the network spread out among other large population centers in the province. These locations represented agricultural regions affected by drought, mining-impacted watersheds, and remote Indigenous communities. The geographical spread of the network offered more nuanced place-based solutions beyond large city centers.

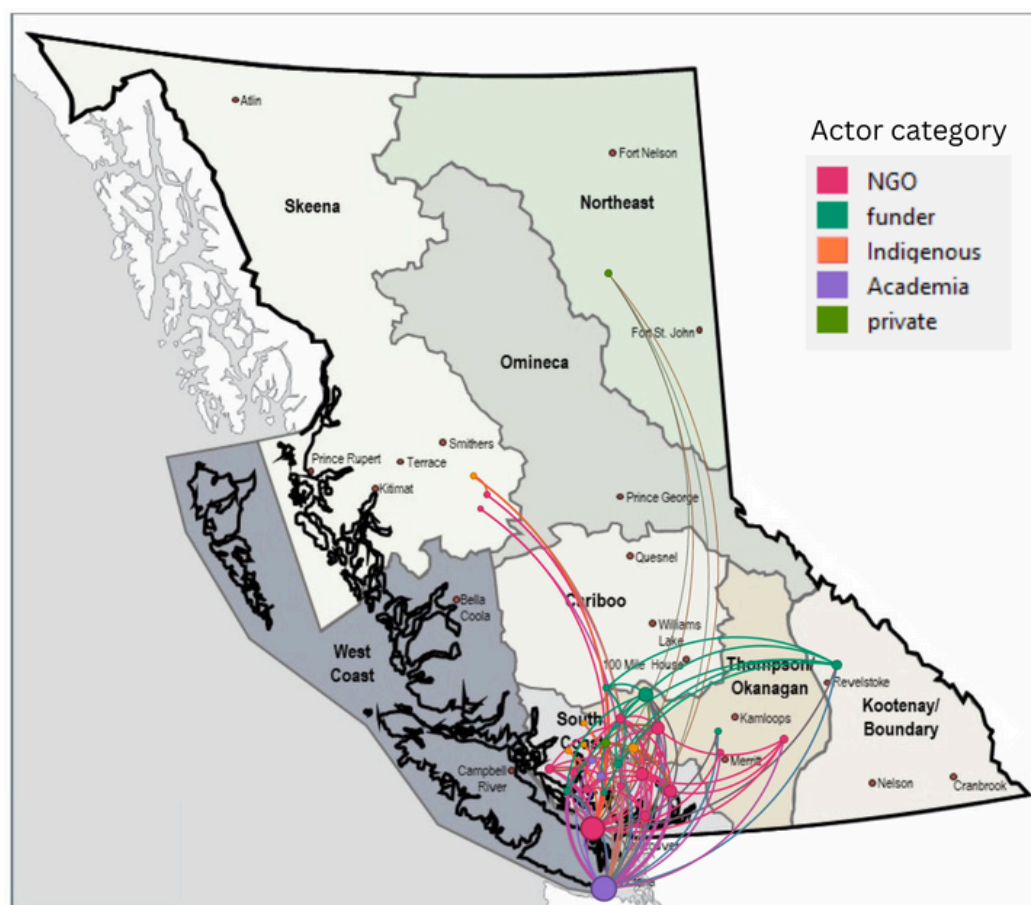


Figure 3. Network mapped based on geographic locations, with no overlap setting.

WHAT MADE THE NETWORK EFFECTIVE: INSIGHTS FROM NETWORK MEMBERS

Theme	Description	Examples	Why it worked
Cross-sectoral policy development	Developing water governance policies through cross-sectoral understandings of water	Providing analysis and policy papers on land-use planning, industry, and Indigenous rights in water governance	Understanding that water governance was broad and involved multiple ministries and sectors
Policy development outside of government	Policy developed through policy experts and based on community experiences	Water policy was developed based on real and ongoing issues in the province	Policy developed outside of government could be more responsive to needs of the community
Indigenous rights & knowledge	Incorporation of Indigenous rights, values, and knowledge into watershed management	Incorporating Indigenous rights into projects and policy outcomes by members	Reflects changing values of Canadian government in Indigenous title and rights
Scale	Inclusion of communities across the province through regional concerns	Inclusion of policy to address different geographic concerns, from droughts to flood to mining pollution	The province can see the important and need from different groups across the province

“[The network] was utilizing the knowledge on the ground from people that are living in community, work in community, to inform the Water Leaders at a provincial level and also for the provincial water leaders to come and [...] be able to inform these communities what's happening on a provincial level that may affect the work that you're doing and your community.”

WHY IT MATTERS

Environmental policy can be idealistic, but it cannot be abstract. We depend on the environment for food, water, biodiversity, as well as climate resilience in the face of climate change. When decisions are disconnected from the communities they impact, policies can face resistance or require costly revisions.

Networks can play an important role to bridge some of these gaps. They offer another policy arena to develop, test, and refine policy ideas, and can provide value beyond members of the network. Unlike formal institutions, networks allow for cross-sectoral, non-hierarchical collaboration, encouraging information sharing, advocacy, and place-based expertise. Networks also prioritize relationships and trust, including equity and inclusion at the core of discussions.

Climate change disproportionately affects marginalized communities. When networks and other policy mechanisms make an effort to include these voices, the resulting policies are not only more equitable, but more effective.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. **Recognize networks as policy actors** where ideas are formed, refined, and amplified based on lived realities and practical insights
2. **Support and resource networks** that demonstrate cross-sectoral collaboration, local representation, and inclusive knowledge-sharing
3. **Leverage network capacity** to build policy momentum and support nuanced implementation, especially in marginalized communities or remote regions

