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Graham Ambrose

Syracuse University, grambros@syr.edu

Jangmin Kim

SUNY University at Buffalo

Saba Siddiki

Syracuse University

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Evaluating conflict in collaborative environmental governance: A study of environmental justice councils (Graham Ambrose, Jangmin Kim, and Saba Siddiki)

Brief Author: Davor Mondom

Conflict is a recognized aspect of the policymaking process. However, few empirical studies on policy conflict have been done. This paper explores policy conflict in the context of environmental justice (EJ) councils, collaborative governance bodies designed to bring together diverse stakeholders to advise on environmental policymaking as it impacts historically marginalized and underrepresented populations. The authors focused on a single state-level EJ council, collecting the council's governing document, annual reports, and meeting minutes to capture the structure of the council, who participated and in what capacity, and the nature of communication among participants.

Tracing Policy Conflict Over Time

Scholars have different views on the effect of collaborative governance on conflict over time; some believe that collaboration lowers conflict, while others think that, by bringing together those with divergent perspectives, collaborative governance increases conflict as individuals intrench around their beliefs. The authors coded the council's meeting minutes to identify both the presence (or absence) of conflict statements as well as statement directionality (i.e., whether statements represented one- or two-way communication). The authors found that conflict among council participants neither increased nor decreased over time. This suggests that the existence of a collaborative governance arrangement alone will not affect conflict, but that levels of conflict are instead contingent on other factors.

The Effect of Participant Attributes and Activities on Conflict

In addition to evaluating statements from meeting minutes, the authors also gathered information about EJ council participants, including the sector to which they belonged (i.e., whether they were an appointed citizen or a government official) as well as their coordination activities (i.e., whether they are engaged in e.g., knowledge sharing and problem solving). The authors found that appointed citizens were more likely to make conflict statements than government officials, and also that relationship-building activities (e.g., problem solving) were associated with more conflict statements than knowledge-building activities (e.g., knowledge sharing). This shows that the characteristics of those involved in collaborative governance venues and how they participate has more of an impact on how much conflict is present.

KEY FINDINGS

- There are no general trends towards more or less policy conflict in collaborative governance venues over time.
- Rather, participant backgrounds and the types of activities that they engage in drive levels of policy conflict in collaborative governance.

For more information, please see Ambrose, G., Kim, J., and Siddiki, S. Evaluating conflict in collaborative environmental governance: A study of environmental justice councils. *Review of Policy Research*. Online first. <https://doi.org/10.1111/ropr.12614>.



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About the Brief Author: Davor Mondom is the Center Coordinator for the Center for Policy Design and Governance. He earned his B.A., M.A., and Ph.D. in history from Syracuse University.

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