



Wiki n°23: Adaptive Governance

Adaptive governance is a concept that has emerged in the fields of natural resource management, environmental policy, and sustainable development. This governance model is designed to be flexible and responsive to the complexity and uncertainty inherent in managing ecological and social systems. The fundamental principle being that policies and management practices should adapt to change and new knowledge to effectively address current and future challenges.

Adaptive governance is particularly relevant in water resource management, where watershed organizations integrate diverse water users and government representatives to collaborate on water management plans. These plans can be adjusted to respond to changing climatic conditions and emerging scientific advancements.

Fundamental principles of adaptive governance

- **Continuous Learning:** Adaptive governance relies on an ongoing learning process, where decisions are adjusted based on outcomes and newly acquired knowledge. This requires mechanisms to monitor, evaluate, and incorporate lessons learned from experience and scientific research.
- **Multi-Stakeholder Participation:** It promotes a participatory approach involving diverse stakeholders at various levels—governments, businesses, local communities, and non-governmental organizations (NGOs). This diversity allows for a more comprehensive understanding of challenges and the identification of more robust solutions.
- **Flexibility and Adaptability:** Policies and practices must be designed to be readily modified in response to new information or changes in environmental or social contexts. This necessitates a degree of institutional and legal flexibility.
- **Integration of Spatial and Temporal Scales:** Adaptive governance acknowledges that ecological and social issues often operate across multiple scales, requiring responses that are effective at different levels.

- Decentralization: By encouraging decentralization and empowering local actors, adaptive governance enables communities and local institutions to tailor solutions to the specific characteristics of their contexts.

Advantages and challenges

The advantages of adaptive governance include the following:

- Adaptive governance enhances the resilience of governance systems, enabling them to adjust to disruptions or environmental changes.
- Greater inclusivity fosters more equitable and widely accepted decisions by incorporating diverse perspectives.

Three major obstacles are as follows:

- Coordination Complexity managing multiple actors and decision-making levels can be challenging and resource-intensive.
- Institutional Barriers: Legislative or institutional changes may be required to ensure sufficient flexibility and adaptability in governance processes.
- Access to Information: Adaptive governance depends on reliable and up-to-date data, which can sometimes be difficult to obtain.

In conclusion, adaptive governance provides a promising framework for addressing complex environmental challenges effectively and equitably. However, it requires significant adjustments to traditional governance approaches to become fully operational.

Find out more:

- Juhola, S. (Ed.). (2022). *Handbook on adaptive governance*. Edward Elgar Publishing. DOI: [10.4337/9781800371972](https://doi.org/10.4337/9781800371972).
- Scholz, J. T., & Stiftel, B. (Eds.). (2005). *Adaptive governance and water conflict: New institutions for collaborative planning*. Resources for the Future. Link.
- Berkes, F., Colding, J., & Folke, C. (Eds.). (2003). *Navigating social-ecological systems: Building resilience for complexity and change*. Cambridge University Press. Link.