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**Legitimacy of Collaborative Environmental  
Governance in New Zealand:  
The Manawatū River Leaders' Forum**

A thesis presented in partial fulfilment of the requirements for  
the degree of

Master

in Environmental Management

At Massey University, Manawatū, New Zealand

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2015

## Abstract

Over the past few decades, collaborative governance has emerged as an alternative to traditionally adversarial approaches such as hierarchical command-and-control regulation. A wide range of governance theory praises collaborative governance with multi-stakeholders' participation as an effective strategy to deal with a public issue. Environmental deterioration, such as water pollution, is a cross-cutting issue that has been in a favour of collaborative approaches to resolve. The promise of collaborative environmental governance is to make environmental policy more effective for sustainability.

However, multi-stakeholders' participation poses challenges in practice if it really makes any difference to and is compatible with environmental policy decision-making processes within a set timeframe. Power imbalance, for example, entails legitimacy deficits to ensure the effectiveness of collaborative environmental governance. Therefore, legitimacy is an important concept that defines a political acceptance whether or to what extent collaborative governance can result in more sustainable or effective environmental policy.

This study assesses legitimacy of collaborative environmental governance by using the Manawatū River Leaders' Forum (MRLF), a collaborative forum to solve water quality issue in southern North Island of New Zealand, as a case study. The study focuses on developing a framework for assessing legitimacy based on three types of legitimacy including input, output and throughput legitimacy that are applicable to explore the MRLF's effectiveness. In corresponding to these legitimacy types, the legitimacy assessment framework is designed with three dimensional factors including participatory quality, policy effectiveness and collaborative process with their own indicators and criteria.

Results of analysing published data indicate that the MRLF is basically legitimated as a fundamental commencement for collaboration as participations by different stakeholders are active and collective decisions have been implemented. However, interviews with MRLF's key stakeholders demonstrate different perspectives on

legitimacy through an existing conflict. Through the three dimensional factors, governmental stakeholders perceive high legitimacy, while most non-governmental stakeholders perceive low legitimacy. This study suggests ways to look conflict as a collaborative learning, rather than fighting, to bridge a synergy between collaboration and conflict. Although collaboration aims to resolve conflicts, collaboration should be learnt as one aspect of conflict management through controversial policy settings.

## **Acknowledgements**

I would like to express my deepest gratitude to my supervisor, Dr Jeffrey McNeill, School of People, Environment and Planning for his excellent guidance and providing me with an admirable atmosphere for doing this research. Every spot of his colourful pen inks marking on my writing counts to this success. My appreciation also goes to his lectures of Natural Resource Management paper in which I was inspired by policy development and institutional arrangements in New Zealand that was a driver of interest to conduct this research.

I greatly appreciate leaders and representatives of participating organisations in the Manawatū River Leaders' Forum for their willingness to be interviewed. Their opinions, experience and information were useful insights to fulfil this research's objectives.

My sincere thank goes to Institute of Agriculture and Environment, College of Sciences, where I had a convenient office to enjoy working on my assignments and thesis with two computer screens and cups of coffee. A special thank goes to Assoc. Prof. John Holland for his lectures of Advanced Environmental Management paper in which I was fascinated by my very first assignment about analysing a regional policy statement that then became a case in this research. I also deeply appreciate other lecturers from other institutes for providing me with valuable knowledge and successful feedbacks on assignments that were a prerequisite before moving to thesis pathway.

I am grateful to New Zealand Aid Programme for financially supporting my Masters study that will be a stepping-stone of my future success. My dream of studying abroad would never come true, and this Degree would not be successful without this meaningful support. I would also like to thank the International Student Support Officers, especially Jamie Hooper for his support.

I also much appreciate my smart friend, Dr Kevin Leeson, in Brisbane Australia, for assisting me in proofreading my thesis. My warmest thank goes to my friends for sharing life experience and making "quiet Palmerston North" more cheerful to reduce stress out of hard study.

Finally, this success is for my parents, Soulaphonh and Thongleuang Naovalat, who underpinned my motivation. Their hard work to support my previous education inherits a world in which poverty is not a barrier to high education, but perseverance is a driver of success.

SN

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## List of Abbreviations

DCC	District and City Councils
DoC	Department of Conservation
HRC	Horizons Regional Council
IFS	Integrated Freshwater Management
LAWF	Land and Water Forum
MRLF	Manawatū River Leaders' Forum
MWR	Manawatū-Wanganui Region
NGOs	Non-Governmental Organisations
NPS-FM	National Policy Statement for Freshwater Management
RI	Research Institutes
RMA	Resource Management Act 1991
RPs	Regional Plans
RPSs	Regional Policy Statements
SLUI	Sustainable Development Initiative