

Embracing boundary spanning roles in Flood Risk Management

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¹ Cumiskey, L. (2020) Joining the dots: A framework for assessing integration in Flood Risk Management with applications to England and Serbia. Chapter 7. PhD thesis, Middlesex University. <http://eprints.mdx.ac.uk/29624/>

This PhD research¹ briefing note offers insight into the role of ‘boundary spanning’ individuals in enabling integration in Flood Risk Management (FRM) and advises policymakers and practitioners how to embed them within the governance system for FRM.

Introduction

Achieving integration in the context of Flood Risk Management (FRM) is challenging. Often proactive individuals are relied upon to strengthen actor relationships and navigate governance mechanisms to realise joint knowledge, plans or interventions across boundaries. But, is it really just down to individuals? This research conducted in England and Serbia did identify multiple boundary spanning roles (see Figure 1) but also highlights their dynamic interdependencies with the governance system. These interactions need to be addressed jointly to positively reinforce one another and support integration in FRM.

Figure 1:
Boundary spanning roles supporting integration in Flood Risk Management



Characterising boundary spanning roles in FRM

² Williams, P. 2011. The life and times of the boundary spanner. Journal of Integrated Care.

The importance of individual roles in facilitating joint outcomes is captured across literature through terms like *champions*, *policy entrepreneurs* and *knowledge brokers*. However, in this research ‘boundary spanning’ roles, building on Williams (2011)² fit well with the broad range of roles identified for achieving integration for FRM. The boundaries that individuals need to span can include, sectors, disciplines, and administrative or geographical borders. Each boundary spanning role is explained below as shown in Figure 1, with their skills highlighted in italics. Across the roles, the proactive, passionate and persistent attitude of individuals were identified as important personal characteristics enhancing their ability to enable integration.

Reticulist

A senior individual with the network, power and perspective to transcend boundaries and a bird’s eye view for identifying opportunities. They have *strategic communication and diplomacy skills* to build relationships between actors and across agencies to help access resources for integration in FRM. This role was identified in partnership chairs who often acted in multiple committees or partnerships e.g. English Regional Flood and Coastal Committee (RFCC) chairs and senior members of organizations.

Entrepreneur

A *creative and innovative* individual that captures opportunities to complete the complex puzzle for achieving integration in FRM. They *test the flexibility* of existing rules and funding mechanisms, bringing together and empowering actors across boundaries. They are willing to *take risks* and *think differently* to realise integrated interventions across boundaries, such as flood schemes that embed natural flood management and unlock economic growth (e.g. Leeds) or empowering teams of volunteers to generate risk data (e.g. Kraljevo, Serbia). This role was found to be prominent in local or regional managers who acted outside of their formal role. For example, the Lead Local Flood Authority flood risk managers, Partnership and Strategic Overview Environment Agency managers in England and in Serbia the heads of municipal Departments of Civil Protection.

Interpreter

An individual that acts on the interface to translate across specific boundaries. They effectively build interpersonal relationships by *listening to and understanding* the priorities, drivers and mechanisms other actors operate under to identify the ‘hooks’ to facilitate integration with FRM. They help frame FRM and/or sector-specific priorities differently across other disciplines by *interpreting different professional languages* and *resolving conflicts* – as illustrated in Figure 1 between FRM and housing growth. This role was strongly identified in FRM in England through jointly funded staff positions (via local levy) e.g. strategic planning advisor, Anglian Water FRM partnerships advisor, community FRM facilitators, but also within FRM liaison roles in sector-specific organisations e.g. Network Rail, West Yorkshire Combined Authority.

Organiser

An individual that works intensively on administrative tasks – *planning, coordinating and convening* - to bring people together across boundaries. They keep agendas refreshed, meeting minutes noted and ensure continued and coordinated interaction amongst actors. This role was found in dedicated partnership secretariats or coordinators, for example the Local Resilience Forum and RFCC secretariat in England, and the City Emergency Headquarters in Serbia. This role was found to be attached to other existing roles in staff constrained settings, for example managing local FRM partnerships or catchment partnerships in England.

Specialist

An individual who has a specialist role but is *open and willing* to engage across sectoral or disciplinary boundaries to support integration. This was identified in technical specialists, such as engineers, that require *lateral thinking skills* to support more integration for FRM. For example, highway or drainage engineers can gain from ‘stepping back’ and thinking broadly about their specialist topic in a more integrated way with other specialists e.g. ecologists. This role was identified in addition to the four outlined above, as recognised by Williams (2011).



Governance mechanisms needed

To achieve integration in FRM, this research showed that the key is combining both individual efforts and adapting governance mechanisms such that they continuously mutually reinforce one another. It highlighted the importance of generating, training and sustaining the growth and development of these boundary spanning roles across FRM and sector-specific organisations. Embracing these roles is fundamental for building and maintaining strong relationships and adapting governance mechanisms, which ultimately facilitate the generation of knowledge, policies and interventions across actors.

“the rules dictate that you have to thread carefully around [employing joint staff]” – RFCC representative England

“I think learning how to articulate flood risk messages in languages that your audience find appropriate is a real skill.” – strategic planning advisor England

“Where you have that connection and understanding and people that are ready to work and contribute - you don’t have problems” – a Serbian Dept. of Civil Protection

Generating boundary spanning roles

Boundary spanning competencies need to be actively identified when hiring individuals, such as managers, that can develop into boundary spanning roles e.g. entrepreneurs, specialists. For other boundary spanning roles (e.g. interpreter, organiser), dedicated resources are often required but these can come with challenging constraints. Examples are the time-limited and rigid nature of funding and human resource rules for hiring roles that transcend organisations or sectors. Spending joint funds (e.g. local levy in England) on shared staff can be difficult justify for decision-makers without evidence on the impact or benefit of their boundary spanning role. However, a lack of dedicated resources for boundary spanning roles runs the risk of them being added on to already overloaded roles (e.g. partnership coordinators, sector-specific liaisons). For these reasons, it is important to monitor the impact of these roles on FRM which can help justify the need to embed them as a core staffing requirement.

Training and developing roles

Interdisciplinary school, university and professional programmes are needed to encourage interest in FRM and these boundary spanning roles at multiple stages of education and career development. Strengthening boundary spanning skills such as, creativity, flexibility, strategic thinking and interpreting different professional languages, will help naturally progress proactive individuals into multiple boundary spanning roles. Increasing professionals’ access to mentoring, networking and knowledge exchange activities, job rotations and joint work settings across a range of sectors is vital for building their boundary spanning skills to influence integration in FRM. Continuously developing capacity for these roles across education and professional training will strengthen organisations’ ability to deal with staff setbacks (e.g. loss of an individual) by being able to more easily transition staff into new boundary spanning roles.

Sustaining roles in the long run

To ensure long-term continuity of these boundary spanning roles it is important to build a culture of collaboration and learning within and across organisations. The findings suggest that being surrounded by others in a supporting, positive and proactive environment where joint working is valued, helps to continuously fuel their motivation to generate impact. The importance of recognising individuals’ efforts and ensuring continuous access to training and skills development was also found to help sustain their motivation and persistence. However, (boundary spanning) staff, their training and associated activities (e.g. partnerships) are often the first to be cut during challenging economic times but they are the ones most needed to generate creative solutions. Sustaining long-term investment in nurturing boundary spanning staff capacity across sectors is crucial for the FRM sector to continuously learn and adapt to new challenges. Their value should not be underestimated in the long-term.

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This research briefing note can be referenced as follows: Cumiskey, L. (2020). Embracing boundary spanning roles in Flood Risk Management. PhD Research Briefing Note 2. Middlesex University.

However, where possible please reference Chapter 7 in the PhD thesis¹.

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