Exploring the ebbs and flows of community engagement:

The pyramid of engagement and water activism in two Canadian communities

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Abstract

In this paper, the authors share results from a comparative study exploring the dynamics of community engagement surrounding local water advocacy organizations in two Canadian communities. While emergent local issues and the perception of crisis triggered some short term community engagement, social factors such as collective identity, a sense of community, and sense of efficacy appear to be more important for sustaining and deepening engagement. Drawing on the results, the authors show how the "pyramid of engagement", by depicting activist engagement as a multi-level, developmental process, can serve as a useful tool for community engagement scholars and practitioners alike.

Keywords: water activism, social action, community-based organizations, community engagement, community organizing, pyramid of engagement, community-based research
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Citizen participation is critical to deepening democracy, and community organizations are an increasingly vital avenue through which that participation is realized. While some may argue that too much citizen participation can complicate and undermine effective policy-making (e.g., Yates, 1980), the overwhelming consensus among scholars and practitioners of community social work, community psychology and urban studies is that increasing citizen engagement is desirable "in that it is likely to lead to a more equitable distribution of the benefits of urban life among citizens" (Hays, 2007, p. 402).

In this exploratory study, we compare trends in community engagement surrounding small, locally rooted, volunteer-based water advocacy organizations in two Canadian communities. These kinds of small scale, often ad hoc, local organizations, we believe, present a particularly accessible, understandable and "satisfying" arena in which everyday citizens can practice the skills and develop the perspective required for active participation in democratic society (Hays, 2007, p. 402). Community organizations provide people with opportunities for entry into "political discourse and action," for learning about political issues, specific policies, and the associated debates, and for unpacking the complexities of the democratic process (Rusch & Swarts, 2015, p. 13). As much as serving instrumental objectives such as policy change, community organizations serve as "vehicles for the expression of articulated interests and values" from grassroots citizens (Clemens, 2006, p. 216). Through community organizations, grassroots citizens – especially those marginalized from more formalized political processes or civil society organizations – gain voice to assert their priorities and their interests, to share their
visions of the world "as it ought to be" (Jones, 2015, p. 369), and to participate in what Étienne Balibar (2008) calls a democracy “beneath and beyond the state” (cited in Blee, 2012, p. 4).

The idea that people in small groups can work together to shift the world closer to the way it ought to be is "an energizing theme" that drives organizing and the engagement of community in action in many contexts (Jones, 2015, p. 369). Indeed, as Hays (2010) has argued, it is often in the "local, placed-based arena" that citizens can have their most direct impact on policy (p. 402). In the context of the broader neoliberal project, moreover, community organizations are becoming an increasingly vital locus of action and citizen engagement. A number of scholars have documented a "pronounced expansion" in community organizing since the mid-1980s (Christens & Speer, 2015, p. 197; see also Bezboruah, 2013; Fisher & Corciullo, 2011), driven in part by the retreat of governments from regulation and social support and in part by the diffusion of power, agency and contestation in post-industrial capitalist contexts (Castells, 2000; Touraine, 1988). The proliferation of community organization in this context represents a "countervailing force" to the atomization, civic disengagement, and individualist, consumerist forms of participation in neoliberal society (Christens, & Speer, 2015, p. 203). As building blocks in social movement formation or as autonomous expressions of civil society, small-scale, volunteer-based organizations are a growing part of the democratic landscape, invigorating public discourse and shaping new ways of "talking and doing politics" (Blee, 2012, p. 3).

One focus around which people in communities all over the world are increasingly banding together to take action is water. Imbued with all kinds of social, cultural and spiritual significance, water is a life good around which grassroots peoples in a wide variety of contexts seem prepared to take action to defend when local supplies or socially just access to them are threatened (Arnold, 2001; Case, 2016). The struggles over water in Bolivia, which in 2003
contributed to the overthrow of government and which vanquished multinational, for-profit water companies from the country, are an iconic example of a grassroots citizens' movement around water (Spronk & Webber, 2007). Though less dramatic than the Bolivian example, similar community-based water struggles are being waged against polluters, water diversions, privatization of water services, groundwater mining, and a variety of other threats in communities in contexts as diverse as Kerala, India, Paris, France, Cape Town, South Africa, and Detroit, Michigan (see Barlow, 2007, pp. 102-124). In Hood County, Oregon, grassroots opposition to a Nestlé Waters proposal for groundwater mining culminated, in early 2016, in a referendum that banned commercial bottling of water in the County. In Elora, Ontario, Nestlé Waters Canada's proposals for groundwater mining have led to growing community opposition through a loosely-organized group calling itself Save Our Water (www.saveourwater.ca). In the growing opposition of indigenous communities and others against energy pipeline construction too, the risks to local source water are a central concern (Munckton, 2016).

Though sometimes connected to broader social movement networks, water activism in many contexts emerges through small scale, place-based, and often ad hoc action groups that form in reaction to emergent threats to local waters. Accessible to local citizens and requiring little more than time and interest for involvement, under the right circumstances, localized, community-based organizing can also "play a leading role in affecting system-level change" (Speer & Christens, 2012, p. 425). Creating such change and ensuring that it lasts against the assaults of those who will fight to defend the status quo, however, requires continued and deepening levels of community engagement with the issue of contention. "Over time, victories on particular issues can be reversed unless the group has the capacity to continue to hold decision makers accountable and react to new threats to community well-being" (Speer & Christens, 2012,
Social movements and the community groups can lose efficacy and perish if they are not able to reproduce a "sustainable base of committed activists" (Bunnage, 2014, p. 433). Understanding how to generate and sustain community engagement in a grassroots organization or cause, in other words, is of central to sustaining and broadening social change.

Understandably, therefore, scholars across many disciplines have spent considerable time investigating how and why individuals join others in collective action (Christens & Speer, 2015), and how that initial community engagement can be sustained and deepened over time (Bunnage, 2014). A compelling cause is one part of the equation, but as Zomeren (2013) points out, engagement in collective action does not happen without the "consent of individuals' hearts and minds" (p. 379).

In her broad and comprehensive review of research related to activist retention, Leslie Bunnage (2014) found that building and sustaining engagement in an organization involves a complex interplay of individual psychosocial, social-relational, and organizational factors. Organizations may encourage or discourage community engagement depending, for example, on the level and kinds of demands placed on volunteers, the ways in which the structure or processes of the organization integrate or exclude newcomers, and whether or not potential recruits perceive the organizations as healthy and welcoming. Social-relational factors include the number and strength of social ties to others in the organization or campaign (Jasper & Young, 2007), and the related interpersonal dynamics experienced or witnessed by volunteers (Christens & Speer, 2015). Social ties in a positive social context "not only forecast initial engagement" but may proliferate and deepen through participation, thereby reinforcing engagement over the longer term (Bunnage, 2014, p. 438). Additionally, the social-relational dimension is important for the formation of group or collective identity and sense of shared vision, which reinforces...
social bonds and sustains and deepens activist engagement (Bunnage, 2014, p. 435).

Psychology literature related to activist engagement coalesces around four core factors at the psychosocial level (Christens & Speer, 2015; Zomeren, 2013). One of those factors is identity, as mentioned already. Research has "consistently shown" that stronger group identification leads to a greater likelihood of participation in collective action (Zomeren, 2013, p. 380). Another factor is efficacy, including both a sense of group efficacy – an individual's belief that the group is able to achieve its goals – and the individual's belief that she or he can personally contribute to achieving those goals. A third factor in the psychosocial literature is emotion. Anger or outrage are among the most important emotional triggers for participation in collective action, but emotional factors related to social trust and psychological empowerment also play an important role in activist engagement (Christens & Speer, 2015, p. 203). The fourth factor is a set of cognitive processes and outcomes, such as skills or knowledge development and increased critical and moral consciousness regarding the issue at hand.

At a practice level, a number of Canadian environmental groups have been experimenting with strategies derived from an organizing theory they call "engagement organizing" (Sustainability Network, 2016). Engagement organizing draws on the work of Marshall Ganz in particular, and includes a central idea that bears striking conceptual resemblance to Sherry Arnstein's (1969) classic “ladder of participation.” Similar to Arnstein’s model, the "ladder of engagement" depicts lower-order forms of participation on its lower levels and progressively more intensive forms of engagement as one moves up towards more leadership-oriented roles. Unlike Arnstein’s model, the ladder of engagement focuses on roles and levels of commitment rather than degrees of access to decision-making power. According to Ganz (2010), social movements are organized “by identifying, recruiting and developing leadership at all levels” (p.
2), starting with building a constituency (people who are activated) from a community (people who are concerned but not active) and then facilitating the engagement of constituents at higher and higher levels of leadership. The ladder of engagement thus reflects a process "whereby individuals take on more and more leadership" (Sinnott & Gibbs, 2014, p. 28). The lower rungs are occupied by "supporters" and "leadership prospects" who support the cause but have not assumed ongoing roles or commitments, while the higher rungs in the ladder are occupied by "organizers" and emerging leaders.

Rosenblatt (2010) offers a similar model in the shape of a pyramid (Figure 1). Taking the "ladder" concept one step further, the pyramid metaphor adds a second dimension that depicts the larger number of people who are expected to belong to the lower levels of engagement and the progressively smaller number who occupy the upper tiers of contribution, ownership and leadership in a social movement context. The idea captured in the pyramid of engagement is that people will engage with an issue or organization in different ways and at different levels, depending on a range of individual, social, and organizational factors. As Bunnage (2014) writes, a movement's ability to sustain itself is "a deeply interactive question predicted by its

Figure 1. Rosenblatt's (2010) Pyramid of Engagement.

Examples of forms of engagement

- Leading: joining the board of directors
- Owning: becoming a spokesperson; encouraging friends and family to join
- Contributing: becoming a donor; attending a public event
- Endorsing: signing a petition; writing a letter
- Following: joining a mailing list
- Observing: visiting a website; watching a video

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relationship to its participants: their availability, their relationships to others, and the organization’s capacity to make them feel empowered, obligated, and invested" (p. 440). What the pyramid of engagement adds to this discussion is a means of conceptualizing activist engagement as an evolving process, wherein an individual's engagement in an organization or cause may intensify or relax over time in relation to the factors outlined by Bunnage.

In this paper we explore how the pyramid of engagement might be used as a tool for analyzing the ebbs and flows of community engagement in grassroots activism, through a comparative investigation of water activism in two Canadian communities. In Wellington County, Ontario, and in the Fraser Valley, B.C., community-based groups have been engaging their communities in collective action around perceived threats to local waters. The actions of these water groups have not only raised their profile but also contributed to significant policy wins. In this exploratory paper we share emerging themes from key informant interviews about the dynamics of community engagement surrounding local water advocacy organizations. Based on these themes, we then use the pyramid of engagement to explore implications for theory, research and practice in community organization.

**Methods**

The data summarized in the following section are drawn from an exploratory study comparing the patterns and dynamics of emergent grassroots water activism in two Canadian communities. Described below, the two comparison communities were selected for the existence, in both communities, of a community-based, volunteer-led water advocacy organization, and for the level of visibility achieved by the water organizations around successful campaigns related to water bottling and the governance of groundwater taking.
Qualitative data gathering was carried out between February and April 2015. The authors used semi-structured interviews with 29 key informants in the study communities (14 in Wellington County, 15 in the Fraser Valley) to gather observations about trends and dynamics related to community engagement in water issues in their respective communities. Potential participants were identified by asking contacts in local water and environmental organizations to provide names of leaders of local water advocacy groups, leaders of environmental organizations or networks involved in the study communities, regional or municipal government officials relevant to local water issues, and independent water-oriented activists. From this sampling pool, KIs were selected to create as diverse a range of perspectives as possible. For analysis purposes we categorized the KIs into two categories: members, participants or alumnæ of the water organizations at the centre of the study (“internals”) or people involved in collective action on water or environmental issues in the study communities but not directly involved with the organizations of focus (“externals”). Table 1 provides a breakdown of the KIs by role or affiliation in the community and by gender.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research site and category</th>
<th>Organization or affiliation</th>
<th>Gender</th>
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<td>M</td>
<td>F</td>
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<tr>
<td>Wellington County</td>
<td>Wellington Water Watchers</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>&quot;Members&quot;</td>
<td>Other water orgs</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
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<tr>
<td>&quot;Non-Members&quot;</td>
<td>Environmental leader</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Teacher</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Independent activist</td>
<td>1</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Government: City of Guelph</td>
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<tr>
<td>Fraser Valley, B.C.</td>
<td>Water Wealth Project</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
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<tr>
<td>&quot;Members&quot;</td>
<td>Other water orgs</td>
<td>3</td>
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<tr>
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<td>Environmental leader</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Government: Fraser Valley Regional District</td>
<td>1</td>
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<td>Total</td>
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The interviews lasted between 45 and 90 minutes, following a semi-structured format based around a consistent 12-question interview protocol. The questions asked interviewees to reflect on their observations of trends in community engagement in environmental activities; the prominence of water issues in the local community; people's familiarity with and the reputation of the local water advocacy organization; people's familiarity with the specific campaigns and successes of those water organizations; and the impact of the organizations' activities and successes on community engagement in water issues. The interviews were audio recorded and transcribed, and the data were analyzed using a four-step thematic analysis approach (Patton, 2002) with the assistance of the Dedoose online qualitative analysis tool.

**Background: The Activist Context and Details of the Campaign Wins**

**Wellington County, Ontario, Canada: The Wellington Water Watchers**

The Wellington Water Watchers (WWW) is a volunteer-based citizens’ group in Wellington County in south-western Ontario that is “dedicated to the protection, restoration and conservation of drinking water in Guelph and Wellington County” (WWW, 2014). Since its founding in 2007, WWW has become the main group raising awareness of water issues in the county, and does so through a variety of programs and activities. While advocating around water issues across a largely rural, agricultural county, the organization is based in Guelph, a city of just over 120,000 that has the reputation of a high level of community engagement in social justice and environmental issues. River systems and other surface water issues have some prominence among various actors in the community, but groundwater issues tend to dominate the water activist discourse in Wellington County.

In April 2007, shortly after the group formed, news became public of Nestlé Waters Canada’s application for a permit to pump and bottle up to 3.6 million litres of groundwater per
day from aquifers adjacent to those supplying the city of Guelph (EBR Registry, 2008). Amid a groundswell of community concern, WWW responded by organizing a campaign, which by May 2007 mobilized over 8,000 Guelphites to send letters to the Ontario Ministry of the Environment (MOE) to contest the license application. The permit was ultimately granted, but the campaign won some significant concessions and solidly established WWW in the process. Later that year, WWW incorporated as a non-profit organization, intermittently acquired project funding that enabled the hiring of a part-time executive director and occasional part-time project staff, and maintained a presence in the community through numerous activities and events. Though the organizing model being used cannot be clearly discerned from the available data, many of the Wellington Water Watchers' activities are designed to broaden the base of local residents who are engaged in personal and political action on water issues.

In the fall of 2012, WWW once again found themselves directly at odds with Nestlé Waters, this time around an application to renew the permit to take water from a well near Hillsburgh, Ontario. At issue was Nestlé’s objection to the inclusion in the permit of mandatory reductions in water taking during periods of drought, which they charged was unprecedented and unfair. Before then, and for other permit-holders in the area, reductions during periods of drought were a voluntary prerogative. Nestlé Waters, therefore, filed an appeal to the Ontario Environmental Review Board to have the mandatory drought restrictions overturned. Already mobilized, WWW jumped in, with the help of other like-minded advocacy groups, to oppose the appeal in the resulting tribunal process and to rally public support in the community for their position. With growing opposition in the community and facing bad publicity – but claiming concern for the public resources being consumed in a prolonged appeal process – Nestlé Waters withdrew its appeal in October of 2013. The activists claimed victory.
In the weeks that followed Nestlé’s withdrawal from the appeal, WWW enjoyed considerable press coverage locally and nationally, and even gained some international coverage. With this highly publicized win, WWW also found itself the recipient of financial support from two separate sources for ongoing campaigns on water bottling. As of March 2016, the organization was continuing with community outreach work, and was gearing up for another round of activism related to groundwater extraction for bottling in the county.

**Fraser Valley, British Columbia, Canada: The Water Wealth Project**

The Water Wealth Project (WWP) was launched in February 2013 as a non-partisan and citizen-driven initiative designed for “empowering community residents to regain control over decisions that affect their home waters” (WWP, 2013a). The organization is based in Chilliwack, British Columbia (B.C.) a predominantly agriculture-based city with a population around 80,000, situated on the banks of the Fraser River approximately 100 kilometres east of Vancouver. Though based there, WWP’s mandate often involves it in advocacy in neighbouring parts of the Fraser Valley, and includes work that “ranges from community issues to provincial and national water policy” (WWP, 2013a). Unlike Guelph where activism is part of the political culture, KIs told us that activists are viewed with considerable distrust among the mostly conservative population of the Fraser Valley.

Also unlike Wellington County, where water activism tends to focus on groundwater issues, the concerns of water activists in the Fraser Valley are varied and often quite complex, perhaps due to the centrality of the Fraser River to the economics, culture and ecology of the region, and the variety of stakeholder interests in the watershed. Major development proposals affecting the area, like the proposed Kinder Morgan oil pipeline, represent economic interests while also posing particular risks to the watershed. Agricultural pollution and remediation of
riparian zones at times pits environmentalists and fisheries ecologists against the large, established and productive farming community in the area. Aboriginal title adds further complexity to development planning, government intervention and activist strategies related to water issues, particularly in the context of un-ceded indigenous territories that make up the majority of B.C. including the entire Fraser Valley. WWP has taken care since its inception, therefore, to build relationships with the Sto:lo Nation members and communities.

At the time that WWP was founded, water use in B.C. was governed by the Water Act of 1909, which recent governments have recognized as “no longer adequate to address [B.C.’s] growing population, expanding development, and climate change” (B.C. Ministry of the Environment, 2013, p. i). Backed by independent funding and in anticipation of a provincial election, WWP was launched with a small staff of community organizers and a focused campaign to build momentum around water issues, including actions to put community priorities for revising or replacing the out-dated Water Act onto the political agenda during the election. In early 2013 WWP released a declaration calling for, among other things, “100% community control over decisions that impact our local home waters” (WWP 2013b). To raise awareness of the issues, and using the declaration as a mechanism for engaging local community members in action, WWP organizers knocked on doors, spread information through social and conventional media, and organized public events in the community. By election time, WWP had gathered over 1,000 signatures endorsing the declaration, bringing questions and debates concerning the Water Act revision into the political foreground.

With their visibility and momentum growing, in August 2013 WWP was drawn into public discussion surrounding a Nestlé Waters Canada water bottling operation in nearby Hope, B.C. Through August 2013 and into the late fall, stories about water bottling began appearing
regularly in local and provincial news media, often including comment from WWP. Taking 
every opportunity to set bottling operations within a broader ecological, social justice and policy 
context, WWP reminded British Columbians that Nestlé Waters' groundwater taking in B.C. was 
entirely unregulated under the Water Act and that under the same legislation, local communities 
and First Nations had virtually no input into the governance of local source water.

Amid growing pressure, in March 2014, B.C.’s Minister of Environment introduced Bill 
18: Water Sustainability Act to the Legislative Assembly, setting in motion the process that 
would make it into law in May of that year. The new Act is controversial in many regards, but it 
does nonetheless introduce positive steps toward regulation of groundwater and toward the 
devolution of water governance to the community or watershed level. The Act was already being 
drafted when WWP arrived on the scene and WWP was not the only party pushing for this kind 
of legislative reform. Nonetheless, WWP's contributions to raising the bill's profile during the 
election are widely recognized, and the Province's follow through on the bill and some of the 
provisions contains was seen by water activists as an important win. Moreover, the campaign 
gave the fledgling organization considerable profile, and established it as an important voice on 
water issues in B.C.’s lower mainland. As of March 2016, the WWP remained involved in a 
variety of water-related issues in the Fraser Valley and more broadly, including work related to 
strengthening the Water Sustainability Act to better reflect the organization’s values of citizen 
control of water resources.

**Results: Key Themes in Community Engagement**

A number of themes emerge from the analysis, which describe what KIs collectively 
identify as key trends and factors in community engagement in water issues in the period 
surrounding and following the policy wins. In this section, we describe these themes, using direct
quotes from the KIs where appropriate. While the specific words come from a single individual, quotes are selected for use where they articulate or illustrate a broader theme in the data.

**Trends and Patterns of Engagement**

A common sentiment among KIs in both communities is the idea that the public should be actively engaged in water stewardship even in the absence of an immediate threat. In reality, however, KIs observed, such consistent engagement in water issues is not the norm.

**Spikes and lulls.** In both study communities, KIs affiliated with the organizations ("internals") observed that engagement generally happens in a pattern of “spikes and lulls”, or “cycles”, usually related to specific, concrete events or issues. In both communities, events that bring awareness to controversial commercial and industry water-taking (like corporate permits to take water for bottling) consistently demonstrate this pattern of engagement. In the Fraser Valley, events such as the chlorination of tap water, flooding, and the introduction of new contamination risks (such as a proposal for a toxic waste recycling facility on the Fraser River) have led to similar trends. In both communities, KIs observed that community members tend to react to very specific threats or changes tied to a particular point in time, rather than to more abstract concepts such as commodification of water, water governance or risks for the future.

**The usual suspects.** KIs observed that, following the engagement spikes surrounding events, it is generally a consistent but small core of engaged participants who tend to remain involved in the higher levels of engagement, as owners or leaders. In both communities, KIs noted that there is also lot of membership overlap between different activist organizations, meaning that what active engagement there is tends to be dominated by the same few people.

Related to this trend, "internal" KIs observed that the organizations themselves sometimes discourage broad based participation in the organization either unintentionally, by
neglecting requests from new people to get involved, or intentionally, due to fear of losing control of the organization's public face or messaging. Much of the work done by the two water organizations, according to one thread in the KI data, tends to be conducted by highly-engaged, "elite" volunteers, rather than through broad-based community engagement. Thus, rather than a continual growth in broad-based community engagement in the organizations, the trend appears to have been the maintenance of a small group of highly-engaged individuals:

> You can rally a good-sized community together around something, but usually it’s the same couple dozen suspects that are at the core... (Wellington KI 1, internal)

Consequences of the win. A specific question we explored, given the comparison contexts, was whether winning a highly-publicized battle involving a high profile adversary would stimulate greater public engagement in water activism and in the two water organizations. Asked what impact they felt the campaign wins had in terms of building momentum around local water issues, KIs in both communities conveyed a perception of minimal and temporary impact, if anything, and even of possible counter-productiveness.

In both communities, the wins were seen as valuable in terms of building the visibility and credibility of the water organizations among water advocates, local environmental networks, the media and policy makers. As one member of WWP explained, however, the impact of the win in terms of grassroots engagement and actual change is not so clear:

> Water Wealth, I’d say, succeeded beyond their wildest dreams in terms of... For them for the longest time, their metric for success was media coverage. It wasn’t real change; it was media coverage. (Fraser Valley KI 13, internal)

Even some KIs were themselves unaware of or had forgotten the details of the campaigns and the wins in question, reinforcing the supposition shared by several of the KIs that the general public was unlikely to have noticed the wins at all, despite considerable media coverage. If anything, the level of community activity that grew with the campaigns that led to the wins was, for the
most part, a temporary engagement spike like any other.

An exception to this trend may be found in KI data from Wellington County that points to discreet and location-specific examples of community action that have been emerging in the township of Erin, the site of the 2013 battle with Nestlé Waters Canada. Public school students and environmentally focused citizens there have taken a number of actions to promote public tap water as an alternative to packaged water, including making delegations to town council to press for tap water use at Council meetings and the installation of a water refilling and drinking station at the public places. Although not explicitly tied to WWW or the 2013 campaign about the Nestlé Waters permit extension, given the location, the focus of action, and some of the individuals involved, these developments presumably belong to a related trajectory of action.

**The Ingredients of Activism**

**Inhibiting factors.** Despite the groundswell of momentum behind WWW’s initial campaign against water-taking for bottling, and in spite of WWP’s well-resourced and strategically-planned start, the KI data in both contexts suggest that building and sustaining community engagement with these organizations and on water issues in general has been very difficult. KIs attribute a lack of spontaneous community engagement to a variety of factors.

**Lack of understanding of the issues.** Building awareness of water issues, KIs in both communities observed, is more complicated than making information available as it involves challenging the norms and values of a consumerist society, and counteracting conflicting messaging from advertisers, “mass media spin doctors” (Fraser Valley KI 1, internal), and well-resourced organizations who seek to undermine or silence the activist groups. Grassroots activists groups like WWW or WWP simply do not have the public relations resources and reach of corporations like Nestlé Waters Canada, as one KI pointed out, and need to work hard to
design and deliver messaging that can pierce through the dominant viewpoints.

*Distrust or dislike of "activists"*. Water "activism" is not perceived as positive or constructive by everyone in the communities of focus. In farming-intensive Fraser Valley, in particular, KIs told us that many farmers feel that their property rights and livelihoods are threatened by the demands of water activists: “They don’t trust groups that are green and being painted by that green brush, that environmentalism kind of banner.” (Fraser Valley KI 8, external). Water activism is sensitive enough in this context that some non-member KIs maintain a strategic distance publicly, even if they might privately support the efforts of the activist group:

We try to work with Water Wealth to some extent, but we’re also trying to distance ourselves from Water Wealth because they are very much the watchdog... It’s a good persona to have – the community needs that. (Fraser Valley KI 8, external)

In the very conservative Fraser Valley, activists are viewed by many people "with a lot of suspicion" (Fraser Valley KI 11, external), and as "rabble rousers" who propagate negative feelings in the community:

Citizens being very vocal, being very adversarial, I don’t think is helpful... I think it’s hurting [other] groups... that it all gets painted with the same kind of brush now. (Fraser Valley KI 8, external)

In Wellington County, discomfort or perceived reputational risk of associating with something perceived as "activism" is not as widespread as in the Fraser Valley, but exists to some degree, particularly in relation to actions against water bottling. Otherwise supportive partners have declined to participate with WWW on specific events they perceived as too directly oppositional to local water bottling operations or the company behind them. Greater visibility and effectiveness in campaigns or activities perceived as activism, in other words, may in itself be a deterrent to the participation of some people who are not already deeply engaged.
Busyness and burnout. A common theme in KI responses to the question of what prevents more people from getting involved is that people see themselves as too busy in their everyday lives to get involved in voluntary activities or civic engagement:

We lead busy lives, and your bandwidth for engaging on community issues is only so wide, so people pick and choose what issues or what they can engage in... I have two young children, I’m in activities every week. When they go to bed, the last thing I want to do is sit up writing advocacy letters... (Fraser Valley KI 15, external)

Conversely, among those who dedicated time and energy to the cause at the highest levels of engagement, burnout is a real risk. An activist from Wellington County described it this way:

You give everything you’ve got, and it costs you time and money, and then you just run out psychologically, emotionally, and whatever else... (Wellington KI 3, external)

In-group dynamics and perceptions of expertise. Some people, the KI data suggest, may also avoid participating with the local water organization because they do not feel they belong or have anything of value to contribute. As noted, community engagement efforts tend to attract the same, small groups of "the usual suspects", which over time can take on a sense of exclusivity for new people trying to get involved. KIs affiliated with both water organizations observed that those not already involved may not feel welcome in local water activism:

I hear it from those same couple dozen people: "Oh, well if someone else wanted to step up, we’d be glad to let them." But sometimes from the other side, it’s "hey, it’s all those guys again, maybe there’s not room for me." (Wellington KI 1, internal)

This insider-outsider, expert-layperson dynamic was particularly true, according to KI observations, surrounding the wins described earlier. In Wellington County, some KIs described a situation in which the general membership and new volunteers were actively dissuaded from representing the organization in public venues, in order to control the organization's image and messaging. In some of the data from the Fraser Valley was a perception that WWP's
effectiveness in gaining media attention had created a professional rather than a grassroots perception of the organizations. As one KI in the Fraser Valley explained:

> With elites doing the work, it’s a technical fix, ultimately. It’s like, so we don’t really want to deal with normal people…We’re not really going to deal with the public or local communities …Right now, law has been giving us the wins. Lawyers have been saving us. (Fraser Valley KI 13, internal)

Relatedly, several KIs in Wellington County expressed the possibility that community involvement might be undermined by the perception, generated by the visibility of the campaign and possibly by the campaign win, that the organization is big and well-resourced, and therefore unlikely to be affected one way or another by another person's involvement. A KI in Wellington County summed up the general sentiment in this theme this way:

> I think that the win wasn’t presented in a way that empowered people to want to be involved. I think that it gratified the organization... and it raised the prestige of the Water Watchers; but I don’t think that it was constructed in such a way when people found out about it that it encouraged them to find out more and participate... I think that the feeling that someone is taking care of it, unfortunately, may have been more of a result than encouraging people to want to participate. (Wellington KI 5, internal)

Thus, a successful campaign may have the unintended effect of inflating the size and power of an activist organization, to the detriment of encouraging more broad-based community engagement.

**Facilitating factors.** Across the two communities, our research found considerable consensus on what KIs observe to be things that encourage and facilitate community engagement.

**Concrete and local issues.** A particularly strong theme that emerges from KIs in both communities is that a localized, concrete crisis or immediate perceived threat is a significant trigger for spurring community members to action. Most of the KIs themselves had quite sophisticated and sometimes abstract reasons for their own involvement in water and environmental issues, but for the broader community, issues like news of corporate groundwater bottling in the local vicinity appear to be what stimulates broad interest and involvement. On the
other hand, a related theme in the KI interviews, consistent with the observation of spikes and lulls in community engagement, is an observation that people eventually need new crises to remain engaged at the same level. An example cited by two of the KIs in Wellington County was of the very muted community response to a second and third application by Nestlé Waters to extend their water-taking activities in Aberfoyle, Ontario, compared to the broad opposition organized around the first application in 2007.

**Presence of a 'bad guy'.** Closely related to the idea of current and local crises, a strong theme in the KI interviews was about the value of a 'bad guy' or a perceived injustice for rallying media attention and public engagement on local water issues. In both communities, the water bottling operations of Nestlé Waters helped to bring attention to related policy issues such as groundwater regulation because, as one KI put it, the public is galvanized by the presence of “a bad guy that everyone loves to hate” (Fraser Valley KI 4, external).

**Sense of community.** A prominent theme in both contexts, directly related to the "group belonging" barrier noted above, was about the power of like-minded compatriots to inspire engagement. In the case of KIs who are internal to the organizations of focus, the development of social connections, friendships and a sense of community were something that emerged very strongly in their own narratives about getting involved in activism or advocacy:

Activism... I would say it starts in and around a community and getting involved in a community, and then sort of being nurtured and that. And then those individuals that you bounce on and off through the ages and that grows, the circles overlap.... then someone approaches you one day and says, hey, I worked with you on that, are you available or interested in working with me on this? And then you say yes, because you had a fun working relationship with them before, and why not? (Wellington KI 2, internal)

Among the KIs was a widely shared observation that these social connections are what facilitate deepening levels of engagement and more big-picture conceptualization of water issues.
Sense of efficacy. Another theme in the KI data in both contexts was that people's perceptions of an ability to make a meaningful contribution and affect change are an important motivator for engagement. Consistent with the psychological literature outlined above, KIs observe that not only do individuals need confidence in the organization's efficacy, but they also need to feel that they can personally make a meaningful contribution to it.

Degrees of engagement. In addition to observations about what facilitates and what discourages community engagement, some KIs also shared insights about getting people from lower to higher levels of engagement. KIs in both contexts, for instance, observed that most people, at least initially, want meaningful ways to contribute that do not involve a long-term commitment. As one KI pointed out, activist organizations sometimes turn people off by expecting high levels of engagement from the first contact:

You're never going to engage everybody in your constituency, but if you can say, okay, your first act is something that’s really easy for someone to do... then you can build on that. I think in the environmental community broadly, we jump too far too fast, and we ask people to get involved at a level that they’re just not ready or able for. (Fraser Valley KI 15, external)

As one member of the WWW observed, similarly, it is a socially positive and productive-feeling initial experience that “makes you feel like, what else could we do?...That makes people feel good and that made me feel good. I think that people want to feel effective with their time and energy.” (Wellington KI 4, internal).

Discussion

In both communities, broad-based community engagement on water issues appears to emerge in short-term spikes of activity around specific local events and then quickly fade, rather than building in breadth and strength over time. Reflecting the emotional and cognitive (e.g., morality) factors outlined above, the presence of a "bad guy" (like Nestle Waters) or the
perception of an immediate, concrete, and local crisis, appears to be significant factors in triggering participation in collective action.

According to our research, though, the crisis response and “bad guy” narratives are limited in terms of building higher-level grassroots engagement over the longer term, and here it is instructive to return to the concept of a pyramid of engagement. Our findings suggest that while the local crisis and “bad guy” narratives appear to have some impact in engaging people at the lowest tiers of the pyramid (observing or following), they are insufficient on their own for sustaining that engagement or for generating movement to higher levels on the pyramid (i.e., owning and leading). Similarly, the policy wins achieved by the two water groups, which we anticipated would stimulate community engagement based on a sense of group efficacy, appear to have triggered only a temporary bump in engagement at best. In the experience of several of the KIs, a higher level of engagement, for most people, evolves in increments as the pyramid of engagement depicts, rather through a jump into ownership or leadership roles in an organization or campaign. Perhaps more importantly, when key informants described their own progress up the pyramid of engagement (see "sense of community" above for example), and when they reflected on the factors that move others up or down the pyramid of engagement, the focus of their comments is overwhelmingly on the on social factors that motivate or inhibit engagement. The urgency of the issue at hand and the substantive dynamics of the related campaigns were rarely raised as explanatory factors in this context.

In our study, a sense of group identity and belonging (or exclusion) and a sense of efficacy (or lack thereof) were identified as key determinants of movement up the pyramid of engagement. Perceptions of the water organizations as professional and expert-driven, rather than grassroots, make some people feel ill-equipped to participate even when motivated by the
cause itself. The observation that decision-making and action tends to be carried out predominantly by "the usual suspects", similarly, carries with it the risk of establishing an in-group of activists that prevents others from engaging at higher levels. This theme is consistent with previous research, outlined above, that points to the importance, in terms of sustaining and deepening engagement, of establishing of a sense of collective identity, and the social relationships that both fuel it and emerge from it (e.g., Bunnage, 2014). While busyness and burnout were identified in our study as impediments to higher levels of engagement, such factors, our findings suggest, may also be attenuated by social factors such as feeling part of something, experiencing a sense of accomplishment, connecting with like-minded others, and having fun. In the absence of these social factors, the importance of the cause may become a demotivating factor over time for people high on the pyramid of engagement.

Contextual factors like pre-existing awareness of water issues or attitudes towards activists and activism have certainly had an impact on community engagement in water issues in the two study communities, making broad-based mobilization more difficult in the Fraser Valley than in Wellington County. Regardless, our findings in both study communities affirm the value of understanding community engagement as existing on a continuum of intensity where concrete, current and local water issues or threats seem to trigger relatively widespread engagement at the lower levels of intensity, but where social factors such as group belonging and identity, positive social relationships and a sense of group and personal efficacy appear to be more important in facilitating or inhibiting higher-level and longer-term engagement. Both the Wellington Water Watchers and the Water Wealth Project appear to have some intrinsic understanding of the social dynamics underlying community engagement, and have been creating activities and programs aimed at reinforcing social connections and a sense of community, and providing opportunities

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to engage at different levels. What our findings suggest is that understanding community engagement as a fluid, multi-dimensional process driven as much by social dynamics as by the issue of concern *per se*, may help organizers to devise engagement strategies that move engagement to high levels and build momentum over time.

**Limitations of the study**

Some modesty must be exercised in extrapolating the findings of this study to other social action contexts without further empirical and theoretical corroboration. Findings presented are drawn from research focused around two small-scale, locally-rooted community organizations. While this ground-level look at community engagement, we believe, has implications worth consideration in a broad range of organizing contexts, caution must be exercised in generalizing the themes presented here to other contexts and other scales and models of organizing. Our findings, moreover, derived from retrospective observations of Key Informants in the two study communities. Although the findings presented represent themes that cut across multiple key informant interviews, the risk of inaccurate or distorted recall cannot be completely ruled out. On the other hand, our data represent the nuanced experience, knowledge and observations of individuals who were well positioned to comment on community engagement in water issues in their communities, and were drawn from an emergent context of community engagement.

**Conclusion**

Our findings suggest that emergent local issues or crises can stimulate community engagement in an organization or campaign, but that reactionary engagement of this kind tends to be short-lived and involve low levels of commitment. By depicting community engagement as a fluid and dynamic process, however, the pyramid of engagement presents a way in which to understand short-lived and low-intensity engagement as a building block for longer-term
momentum building. Our findings, consistent with other research on engagement in activism, suggest that the formation of collective identity, a sense of community, and the perception of self-efficacy are more important for understanding movement up and down the pyramid of engagement than is a feeling of urgency, a sense of crisis, or even the perception that others have succeeded. The implications for organizers is that community engagement strategies need to be geared to the different levels at which community members engage with an organization or a cause and designed above all to reinforce the social processes that strengthen engagement.

Research tracking the journeys of individuals from passive interest to higher or lower levels of engagement is needed to test and further develop the concept of a pyramid of engagement. The development of tools to measure participants' locations on the pyramid of engagement would be very useful as well by enabling researchers (and organizers) to test community engagement at different stages of organization development or campaigns. Research specifically exploring the social dynamics and factors associated with movement on the pyramid or similar concepts, likewise, would be of use to scholars and practitioners alike by building an understanding of the most important factors at play at different levels of engagement.

Community engagement, our research affirms, is a process that requires nurturing and attention to the differential needs of individuals at different levels of engagement. By conceptualizing activist engagement as a multi-level, developmental process rather as a zero-sum construct, we contend that the idea of a pyramid of engagement can serve as a useful tool for understanding how to promote broad-based citizen participation in activism and democracy beneath and beyond the state.
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