

Ripple effect: How public attitudes can shift governments toward sustainable, and resilient, water systems

January 18 2024, by Julia Baird, Gary Pickering and Gillian Dale



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With all the negative news coming out about climate change, its impacts and its possible trajectory in the not-so-distant future, it can be difficult

to maintain hope for a brighter future.

The last few years have been challenging, even for optimists, with international climate meetings like the recent COP28 in Dubai emphasizing [how far we are from where we need to be in terms of climate action](#). Meanwhile, reports like IPBES' global biodiversity report provide [strong evidence for the accelerating deterioration of nature and its benefits](#).

It can feel like there is not enough momentum to move quickly enough to slow climate change and stave off its worst impacts. However, our recent work provides a point of hope and evidence for optimism.

Understanding resilience

We are researchers with expertise in psychology, sustainability, and environmental governance. Our study assessed the attitudes of the general public towards a resilience-based approach to environmental decision-making, with a special focus on [water](#).

Resilience is the ability to respond to disturbances (like [climate change](#) impacts) by resisting change, adapting or transforming, if needed, for the well-being of humans and ecosystems.

There are [seven principles that support resilience](#) that range from promoting connectivity of human and natural systems, to creating inclusive decision-making processes, to being willing to experiment with new approaches and learn from them, even if they are not entirely successful.

We can [assess these principles](#) and each of them contributes to resilience in unique and critically important ways. How we understand what resilience means matters.

Some understand it to be only the ability to resist change, which is not sufficient for what the world needs in this moment. Beyond resisting, we must also adapt, and potentially, transform. However, resilience can also be used as a tool to deflect blame and responsibility for supporting disproportionately affected groups.

Many organizations and international bodies, including the [IPCC](#), [the World Bank](#) and the [United Nations Climate Change Secretariat](#), argue that we need to integrate resilience—including adaptation and transformation—into how we govern, make strategic decisions and take action moving forward.

We need resilience because we are dealing with unprecedented environmental change and the drivers and impacts of this change are highly intertwined, making governance a complex task. Resilience can meet the challenge of complexity. In our work, we focus on resilience in surface freshwater governance, specifically.

Public attitudes

How we govern is determined by many factors, [including public attitudes](#)

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As members of the public, we can vote, protest, communicate directly with elected officials, write opinion pieces for news outlets, talk to our neighbors and friends, and educate our children. We have multiple ways to influence decision-making, and our attitudes play an important role in the messages we send through those spheres of influence.

We measured the attitudes of the general public in six countries representing the Global North and South with a study focused on resilience and water governance. We offered participants in our survey a vignette, or short scenario, about a water issue.

Participants answered a series of questions about the vignette. For each question, they had four options, representing a spectrum of [support](#) for resilience, from no support to full support.

Across six countries (Canada, the United States, Australia, the United Kingdom, India and South Africa) there was [moderate to strong support for a resilience-based approach to water governance](#). These findings suggest a [positive outlook](#) on [public attitudes](#) towards resilience-centered water governance, both now and especially for the future.

The best news from the study was that more than half of the participants across all countries showed the potential for strengthening their support for a more resilient approach to water governance.

We measured potential for growth by asking participants to select all of the options they considered acceptable for each question, before choosing their most preferred option. If participants selected an option that demonstrated stronger support for resilience than the one they most preferred, this signaled room for improving their support.

Taking action

We are encouraged by these results and how consistent they were across multiple countries that have different water issues, cultures and political leadership. We accounted for some of these differences by providing vignettes that dealt with a range of water issues, from flooding to drought to infrastructure concerns.

Even with differing water issues and cultures factored in, attitudes were consistent, and so was the potential to strengthen support for water resilience.

We feel that these results serve as a hopeful message to those who might

be feeling discouraged or pessimistic about our shared future. There are many whose attitudes support resilience-based approaches to [governance](#), and this is a fact worth celebrating.

We also share this message with those in policy leadership positions, like the [Canada Water Agency](#).

The public is supportive of approaches that will improve the [resilience](#) of water systems and strengthen the well-being of humans and the ecosystems upon which we all depend.

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