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Comment on hess-2021-545

Anonymous Referee #1

Referee comment on "A review of the applicability of the motivations and abilities (MOTA) framework for assessing the implementation success of water resources management plans and policies" by John Conallin et al., Hydrol. Earth Syst. Sci. Discuss., <https://doi.org/10.5194/hess-2021-545-RC1>, 2021

I think the authors have delivered a good addition to the development of the MOTA framework and they are thus very well contributing to the discussion and development around this framework. I think the paper can be polished with minor revisions. Although I do want to give some further thoughts to the authors.

First some minor revisions:

I advise to get rid of "building" in consent building and especially capacity building. The term building (esp. in development studies) is regarded old-fashioned assuming, you do it from scratch, and if there is no capacity yet. Development, is considered a better term (although also contested for the same arguments), some prefer capacity enhancement/strengthening. Also has a lesser feel of 'social engineering' and that you can top-down change this from external sources.

Section 2.1: the authors base this on the work of Phi et al (2015) , but it is not very critical on the body of work in policy analysis that Phi overlooked. For example Contextual Interaction Theory (Bressers, H. T. A. (2004). Implementing sustainable development; how to know what works, where, when and how. In W. M. Lafferty (Ed.), *Governance for Sustainable Development: The Challenge of Adapting Form to Function* (pp. 248-318). Northampton, MA: Edward Elgar) and later Owens (Owens, K. A. (2008). *Understanding how actors influence policy implementation. A comparative study of wetland restorations in New Jersey, Oregon, The Netherlands and Finland*. Enschede: University of Twente.) who applied Contextual interaction theory in quantitative assessments. These also take formal governance systems more in account and power relations between actors.

Further thoughts:

It appears that the authors (maybe unknowingly) have positioned themselves in the community that has the view that if we plan more precise (better), are more aware of that will result in improved implementation (lesser overrun of costs, more timely, less conflict). While our experience in implementation (especially when implementation happens via projects, which is often in water infrastructure development) is based on incidents, muddling through, very contextual dependent, very experimental (we try this see, we start and find out along the way); implementation is a continued renegotiation of what was planned (on the goals, the resources, allocation and distribution of costs). The MOTA framework does not much include experiential knowledge of implementers and target groups on what works on how to cooperate and renegotiate implementation in the field. It still rationalizes the process of implementation being a logical follow-up of planning, while implementation itself is highly political and a continuation of negotiations and (dis)agreements.

Being more precise in predicting motivations and abilities for a plan can actually result in more problems in implementation. As stakeholder support is very difficult to predict (as it is a heterogeneous group) and elements of a plan can be rigid due to legal/contractually binding promises in the plan. As this paper is part of a special issue on transdisciplinary approaches rethinking their own position as rational planners is thus welcomed. The following essay relates to these two camps of planning more precise and planning less and learn more from the practice of implementation: Kreiner, K. (2020). Conflicting notions of a project: The battle between Albert O. Hirschman and Bent Flyvbjerg. *Project Management Journal*, 51(4), 400-410.

I thank the authors for their interesting contribution to develop and refresh the interest to implementation, as implementation is as stated crucial.