



TOMÁS OLIVIER'S RESEARCH FOCUSES ON WATER GOVERNANCE IN NORTHEASTERN PATAGONIA

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AND INDIVIDUALS
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GOVERN SHARED
WATER RESOURCES

The work of Tomás Olivier, Ph.D., assistant professor in the School of Public Administration, focuses on how organizations, governments and individuals interact and create rules to govern shared water resources that extend beyond multiple political and geographical boundaries. For the past couple of years, Olivier's work has examined these dynamics in the Lower Valley of the Chubut River in Patagonia, Argentina. The Lower Valley is a stretch of 120 miles of river that is shared by five municipalities and its water is used to irrigate the second largest agricultural valley of Patagonia, while also providing drinking water to approximately 300,000 people. The Lower Valley is flanked on one end by a dam created to provide hydropower and regulate water flow to the communities downstream, and on the other end by the Atlantic Ocean.

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Olivier recently co-authored a paper with Ramiro Berardo that analyzed how, in the absence of clearly defined and enforced mechanisms for collaboration among decision-makers, the different entities in the Lower Valley of the Chubut River participate in policy forums where they discuss how to improve the governance of water. “Birds of a Feather Fight Together: Forum Involvement in a Weakly Institutionalized Ecology of Policy Games,” *Policy Studies Journal*, 2021 (<https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/psj.12418>) analyzed who participates in these forums. The publication focused on whether forum participants had different perceptions about problems in the area, under the assumption that forums should serve as spaces where people with different perceptions meet and try to address their differences. Findings showed that forums are mainly attended by organizations that already have similar perceptions. This finding shows that policy forums can facilitate collaboration and trust-building among like-minded organizations in the short term, while hampering collaboration among dissimilar organizations in the long run.

In another area of research, Olivier recently received a sub-award from a National Science Foundation project to study the effects of changes in reservoir operation rules. In recent years, new approaches to reservoir operations have been developed to improve performance in the context of climate variability. Olivier joined a team of engineers, hydrologists and social scientists to model how these new approaches may affect communities and users downstream. This project will use the Lower Valley of the Chubut River as one of the cases to be studied, assessing first how decisions regarding dam operation are made in a context with low levels of institutionalization, and second how a change in dam operation rules may affect users downstream.

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