

Science for Environment Policy

Flood risk management as a government–citizen partnership

Throughout Europe and beyond, the delivery of flood risk management (FRM) is increasingly being seen as the shared responsibility of governmental actors and citizens. However, a new study, which explored the viewpoints of stakeholders in a flood-prone part of Belgium, found that citizens see FRM mainly as the government's responsibility.

Flooding is a major concern across Europe. This year has already seen some of the biggest floods to strike the continent in decades, with France and Germany the countries worst hit. The severity of flooding is only [expected to increase](#) in the future. The EU's [Floods Directive](#)¹ endorsed the FRM approach to flood prevention, which, *inter alia*, is based on the idea that flooding results from the interactions between [water](#) and [land](#).

In the Flanders region of Belgium, and elsewhere, this has been taken a step further. It is used to inform the concept of FRM as a shared responsibility between water managers, spatial planners, emergency planners, the insurance sector, the building sector and — crucially — citizens. Private individuals can take on some of the burden, for example by flood-proofing their homes; the idea is that this citizen-input approach ultimately improves both effectiveness and efficiency for everyone.

In order to mitigate the damage caused by flooding, it is crucial that the parties involved with FRM are aware of their responsibilities and are willing to undertake them. With this in mind, the Flemish team behind this study explored the perspectives of residents of the Dender basin, and particularly the city of Geraardsbergen, on the current approach to FRM. To do this, they analysed existing policies and plans relevant to the region, conducted their own interviews with 17 FRM stakeholders, and surveyed 108 residents of flood-prone areas in the Dender basin.

Their findings showed a clear difference between the opinions of public officials and those of ordinary citizens. Officials tended to expect citizen input when handling flood risk, whereas the non-governmental residents of flood-prone areas did not see why they should have to contribute. Residents considered flooding to be mainly, or even entirely, the concern of the government. This misalignment could severely hamper the success of the region's FRM.

In other EU nations, such as the UK and Germany, formal strategies have been enacted that shift responsibility for FRM towards citizens, but no such steps have been taken in the Flanders region of Belgium. Without such strategies, informal norms will make people assume the government is responsible for protecting land from flooding. In order to make co-produced FRM workable, in both Flanders and other at-risk parts of the continent, the responsibilities of all stakeholders need to be made clear. Furthermore, it is important that decision makers include ordinary citizens, whose lives are going to be affected in any planning that takes place, in FRM decision-making.

More broadly, this 'co-evolutionary perspective', in which the mutual interactions between the subsystems involved (e.g. government and citizens) shape the evolution of the initiative, has applications in other areas of land-use policy. This is because it allows stakeholders to take into account the complex relationships between different uses of the same land. The study's authors recommend similar pilot studies of stakeholders in different regions and settings in order to assess the merit of these ideas.



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1. [Directive 2007/60/EC](#)