

Science for Environment Policy

How to improve the efficiency of public participation processes in coastal management

Public participation in developing coastal management plans can have numerous benefits, such as augmenting expert information with local knowledge and building trust, a new study has confirmed; however, challenges remain, say the researchers. They use the experiences of 10 case studies to make a series of recommendations regarding how to improve the efficiency of the process.

Public participation has a valuable role to play in the development of sustainability policies; it can enhance the democratic nature of the process, encourage knowledge exchange, foster trust and help reach a consensus. It is considered to be particularly important when managing coastal environments, as this complex task involves many different stakeholders all using the areas in different ways. However, public participation can also create challenges; it can be expensive, labour-intensive, confrontational, and can cause delays to the development and implementation of policies.

To date, there has been little research into ways of improving the process or methods to avoid pitfalls. For this study, researchers examined how to improve the efficacy of public participation in Integrated Coastal Zone Management. In particular, they examine the results of an EU project, [PEGASO](#)¹, using 10 case studies, chosen to represent different spatial scales, issues, expertise and experiences. Seven of these were in the Mediterranean (in Morocco, France, Italy, Greece, Turkey, Egypt and Lebanon) and three in Black Sea (in Romania, Ukraine, Georgia). Each case study group was able to develop its own methods for public participation, after a training course offered by the project.

After exploring the experiences of the 10 case studies, the researchers found that public participation had many positive impacts. It raised awareness regarding the importance of coastal management and ensured that knowledge was shared as well as partly bridging the gaps between the public, scientists, coastal managers and decision makers. However, there were areas that could be improved, and these can be summarised into five main recommendations:

- 1) It is very important that relevant data are available and easily interpreted. To make informed decisions the participants need to have access to a range of information concerning different issues and perspectives.
- 2) Although information from stakeholders is very valuable, helping to bridge gaps between expert and local knowledge, collating and combining these different types of data and information in the case studies proved very difficult and time consuming. Putting a procedure in place to deal with this challenge from the beginning of the process is important.

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1. PEGASO (People for
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- 3) It is essential that there is co-ordination and flexibility between the many actors involved in coastal management. Government agencies, NGOs, businesses, research institutes and others all need to work together. Public participation can only work if it has a co-ordinated structure to build on.
- 4) It is important to encourage local stakeholders to take the lead in the participation process, to ensure that it can continue after the funded project has come to an end. Coastal management is a long-term process and public participation should continue to provide input.
- 5) There is often a mis-match between large-scale pressures on coastal environments and the local-scale governance used to manage them. This is also an important issue for the participation process, and should be taken into account when identifying which stakeholders to include.

