

Science for Environment Policy

Mutual trust between coastal stakeholders key to successful climate change adaptation

A lack of trust between stakeholders, planners and decision makers in coastal Portugal is obstructing adaptation to climate change plans, finds a new study. The researchers suggest that building trust between stakeholders and coastal managers could lead to improved participation and dialogue for future planning, financing and implementation of coastal adaptation.

The Portuguese coast is under increasing threat from erosion, which is putting communities, [ecosystems](#) and economies at risk. Nearly 75% of Portugal's population now live in coastal municipalities. Erosion has increased in the last 30 years as a result of human activities, such as sand extraction and inland alterations to rivers and estuaries, and is set to worsen under climate change. Sea level rise of 40 cm to 1.20 m is expected by 2100.

To safeguard the future prosperity of the country as a whole, adaptive responses to coastal management are needed to minimise both erosion and the future effects of climate change. Stakeholder engagement is important to this. Coastal stakeholders, in sectors such as tourism, fishing, business, and environmental management, often have competing or overlapping interests. Thus, environmental interventions that are aimed at benefiting one group, can potentially interfere with, or actively harm, another group's interests. This is especially the case with fishing communities and the development of coastal tourism facilities.

The researchers in this paper conducted face to face surveys of 643 residents and business owners and in-depth semi-structured interviews of more than 60 people, to examine how stakeholders and residents of three Portuguese coastal communities - Vagueira, Costa de Caparica and Quarteira - perceive possible changes to coastal management, and the extent to which they trust coastal managers. The researchers also examined how coastal stakeholders and residents considered their participation in future forms of adaptive coastal management. The three coastal areas were selected as they share similarities in their development and the problems they face from erosion and flooding, making them suitable for comparative analysis, but are markedly different in their historical evolution and social composition.

The results showed that all three communities were aware of coastal erosion, and knew that it is likely to worsen in the future. Over 80% of respondents in all locations considered it important to maintain the coast as it currently is.

Less than 5% of respondents said they participate in public discussions on coastal management. Of those who did, only a quarter felt they had any influence on outcomes. The stakeholder interviews indicated that public discussions are rarely publicised, which leads to a perceived lack of transparency, and a belief that they were unlikely to influence outcomes.

Interviews with officials revealed that, in some cases, local people were not perceived as important partners in decisions, and hence there was no need to communicate all available information. However, over 95% of the survey respondents felt that the general public should have input on coastal matters, alongside other stakeholders, such as local authorities and scientists.

Overall, the results indicate that there is a strong awareness of coastal threats and the possible impacts of climate change, and a common willingness to engage in coastal management decisions. However, this is undermined by lack of unity between the decision makers and the public in the coastal management decision making process, leading to distrust and poor communication.

The authors suggest that, although there is currently a high level of distrust in local authorities among stakeholders such as the public and local businesses, there is a willingness among all stakeholders to engage in adaptive management approaches, provided there is a genuine commitment from official bodies.

October 2014
Thematic Issue 46

Coastal Zones

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Source: Schmidt, L., Gomes, C., Guerreiro, S. & O'Riordan, T. (2014). Are we all on the same boat? The challenge of adaptation facing Portuguese coastal communities: Risk perception, trust-building and genuine participation. *Land Use Policy*, 38, 355–365.
DOI:10.1016/j.landusepol.2013.11.008

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To cite this article/service: "[Science for Environment Policy](#)": European Commission DG Environment News Alert Service, edited by SCU, The University of the West of England, Bristol.