Improving Policy Implementation Through Public Participation

In 2000, the European Parliament and the Council adopted the European Water Framework Directive (WFD) aiming to improve water management in Europe. The accomplishment of the WFD in the member states is complex and the regional authorities have to face numerous uncertainties on how to implement the WFD.

A German research team has recently reviewed the different types of uncertainty arising in the implementation of the WFD. The authors also analysed how uncertainties were addressed within the directive and three of its guidance documents. In conclusion, they propose to involve a broader public participation in the implementation process to better manage uncertainty.

In this study, the authors considered two types of uncertainty:

- **Normative uncertainty:** the WFD does not provide all the details for its concrete implementation in the member states. This is partly due to the differences in culture, water uses and water problems across European regions. Therefore, numerous decisions on how to implement the WFD have to be taken by the regional authorities.

- **Informational uncertainty:** decision-makers are lacking knowledge, notably about the present and future status of the water bodies, the origins of pollution, and the effects of proposed measures.

The authors analysed the WFD and three of its guidance documents and built up the following conclusions:

- On the whole, the WFD eludes the problem of the uncertainties linked to its implementation in the member states and provides only general and non-explicit strategies.

- The first guidance document (Economics and the Environment, Wateco, 2002) underlines “Gaps in information and knowledge” in the WFD and proposes to improve communication with the public and stakeholders to fill in these gaps.

- The second document (Guidance for the analysis of Pressures and Impacts, Impress, 2003) considers that uncertainties related to the WFD implementation can be reduced in the initial steps of the implementation, through designed and targeted monitoring programmes and increased expertise of the competent professionals.

- The third document (Guidance on the planning process, Proclan, 2003) states that the uncertainties linked to the WFD implementation are due to events beyond our control. It argues that planning strategies are crucial to limit these uncertainties but does not provide any concrete recommendations.

In parallel, the authors suggest that an increased public participation in the WFD implementation process would reduce uncertainties, through the following means:

- Mediation of the different stakeholder interests and goals, reducing the normative uncertainty.

- Improvement of the decision-maker knowledge about local and social status as well as about possible acceptance of the implemented measures, reducing the informational uncertainty.

On the whole, the authors consider that the participation of societal actors in the WFD implementation would enable better informed decisions and more effective measures. Accomplishment of this strategy could also provide valuable experiences to improve future European policy implementations.


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**Additional Information** A number of projects funded by the EU LIFE programme have demonstrated how various types of public participation have improved the implementation of the Water Framework Directive. For more info see: LIFE99 ENV/UK/000203 as an example of using participatory methods for floodplain restoration and management; LIFE02 ENV/LV/000481 as an example of ensuring extensive public participation in the design and development of a river basin management plan; LIFE03 ENV/S/000601 as an example of how forestry stakeholder participation can contribute to the implementation of the WFD; LIFE00 ENV/UK/000894 as an example of local community involvement for the development of sustainable land management practices in the Ythan river catchment.

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