Social Acceptance of Water Quality Costs

An analysis of the social acceptance of possible measures to improve the quality status of European water bodies revealed that the willingness of the inhabitants to invest in different strategies will depend on who will have to bear the costs. The social acceptance will significantly increase if the costs are substantially covered by the public budget.

The achievement of the main goal of the European Water Directive (WFD) - improving the ecological status of European water bodies - is highly challenging for researchers, planning authorities and stakeholders. For its successful implementation, public participation is the key element in ensuring fairness, social justice, and acceptability of the required planning and decision-making processes.

In order to evaluate the acceptance and social dimension of the potential policy measures required to attain the WFD goals, German researchers have formulated a new “cooperation index” which reflects the regional actors’ willingness to cooperate in the process of WFD implementation. This index is calculated by taking into account the following four main factors:

1) The degree of being affected by potential measures – ranked on a 4 level scale according to numerical thresholds (e.g. total water cost differences due to additional wastewater infrastructure investments: =0, ≤ 10€, ≤ 40€, ≥40€)

2) The acceptance of potential measures - evaluated in the course of a dynamic actor network analysis. The latter firstly identified relevant regional actor groups and their representatives and secondly evaluated the actors’ perceptions, interests, and preferences concerning water use.

3) The relevance of the affected uses in the region - assumed to be represented by the ratios of the regional employment, contribution to gross domestic product and/or land use shares.

4) The question of who will bear the costs: individuals or public authorities.

These four factors are aggregated to form the cooperation index which is calculated for the alternative implementation strategies, namely measures to improve river morphology and continuity, measures to reduce diffuse emissions and emissions from point sources.

Recently, the cooperation index has been calculated for the Werra River Basin (Germany). The results have shown that for all the interested stakeholders, social acceptance of alternative strategies will mainly depend on who will have to bear the costs. For instance, in the case of canalisation and water treatment investments, the strategy without public support assuming that the inhabitants would have to bear the costs via contributions ranking from 10 to 220 € per capita per year, resulted in low cooperation in the affected sub-bassins. On the other hand, public cooperation was found to significantly increase assuming that around 65% of the investments costs are covered by public budgets. Thus the authors argue that the general social acceptance of the WFD implementation measures will be significantly dependent on the responsibility of cost bearing: public or private.


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