Connecting scientists and citizens

- Achievements [1]

Communication between scientists, policymakers and ordinary people is never easy. EU-funded researchers turned this on its head by bringing everyone together around one key issue – sustainable water management. This led to concrete recommendations on water management, as well as a blueprint for increasing interaction on local issues that could be applied to other policy areas.

“There is a gap between policymakers and citizens and we need participatory methods to address the gap” explains AWARE [3] project coordinator Carlo Sessa of Italy’s Institute of Studies for the Integration of Systems.

Coastal water management provided the perfect opportunity for the AWARE project to tackle this gap – deteriorating coastal ecosystems affect those living close to the sea, politicians are expected to do something about this, and scientists are in a position to engage both with local communities and politicians to find effective solutions.

Leaving lay people out of policymaking leads to technocracy, says Sessa – policymakers talk only to experts and the results are presented to citizens in the form of a policy decision. This can lead to conflict if citizens aren’t happy with the direction taken. “It’s very important to invest resources early in launching a dialogue with citizens. This can also enlarge the mind-set of citizens and make some solutions more acceptable,” he adds.
The project recruited 30 ordinary people to give their views of water management and engage with scientists, stakeholders and decision-makers in three regions:

- The North Sea (France and Belgium), where nutrient pollution has led to algae and foam both in the water and on beaches. The pollution may also be affecting the food chain.
- The Gulf of Riga (Estonia and Latvia), where water has changed from clear to murky because of eutrophication (excessive plant growth and decay) – the ecosystem’s natural response to the addition of substances through fertilisers or sewage. Balancing water quality with fishing yields is also a challenge.
- The Sacca di Goro lagoon (Italy), one of Europe’s most prolific clam-breeding sites, where a balance is needed between tourism, social and cultural needs, ecological conservation and economic interests.

Engaging politicians

Participants applied to take part, so had an interest in the topic, but had no specialist knowledge of water management. The only requirement was a good level of English so that they could communicate with participants from the other regions.

Local workshops set the stage for discussions on the many sides of water management, before recommendations were presented to policymakers at a public European conference in October 2011.

The approach worked well for both scientists and citizens, while the team identified some barriers to participation by stakeholders and policymakers, says Sessa. “The policymakers simply attended the conferences – there was no real interaction, especially in Italy, although it was better in Riga,” says Sessa, citing different political cultures for the varying levels of involvement.

There were however some very positive outcomes in Italy – local people were very committed to the project and one even went on to stand for – and be elected as – Mayor of the Goro Municipality.

“There is no incentive for policymakers to consider citizens’ views in their daily policymaking,” says Sessa. Until this changes, he is realistic about starting a real dialogue between policymakers and citizens. But while additional research is needed to improve results here, the AWARE project did have some influence on policy: ideas were clearly seeded during the conferences, and later appeared in policy papers.

A two-way dialogue

“The dialogue between scientists and citizens was really two-way,” says Sessa. While citizens increased their understanding of water management, scientists also learnt from the citizens.

“Scientists are used to speaking among themselves in their own jargon. It’s an effort to speak to citizens – it was an exercise in how to communicate and made them more aware of the problems from a citizen’s point of view,” he says.

How to disseminate knowledge from an initial group of citizens to society at large requires further thought. Internet discussions, perhaps via blogs, could be the solution, muses Sessa, but the approach needs testing.

The Sacca di Goro lagoon (Italy)

Project website:
http://www.aware-project.eu/ [3]
AWARE