

Public Participation for Sustainable Water Management – Overview & Application

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Introduction

Population growth, migration, urbanization, expansion of infrastructure, land conversion and pollution are altering the functions of natural ecosystems. The water resources are extremely vulnerable to these changes, and their preservation is on the top agenda of regulatory bodies at different levels. There are two factors, on which an adequate water supply depends – the physical availability of water resources and the management of the water resources. Many authors consider ineffective water policies and weak institutional capacity and implementation as the leading causes for water scarcity.

City councils have a significant role to play, as they are the decision-making authority that is closest to the consumers of water services. The aim of this paper is to outline the advantages of a governance mechanism which can be applied by the city council in the water policy- and decision-making process. The involvement of the civil society in this governance mechanism is especially highlighted, and an example of a public participation method is described.

Throughout the history of water management practices, both the command-and-control and market approaches have shown an array of disadvantages. Whether the rules are made by a centralized body that cannot account for local peculiarities, or the rules are based on market logic – certain stakeholder groups remain excluded from the decision-making process. In contrast, governance can be described as a way of management that includes participation of all relevant actors who look for consensus among them. The interaction of conflicting stakeholders would also trigger a more demand-side oriented water management, which is believed to be the more sustainable approach, in comparison to the supply-side management. Sustainable water management (and in general, sustainable development) has to be a common

vision, otherwise it is difficult to achieve it. That is why, a governance network seems to be the appropriate mechanism to bring the improvements in water management, as it is designed upon a horizontal and reciprocal relation among the actors in it.

Governance Network

The governance model must fit the prevailing social, economic and cultural particularities. In order to be accountable, efficient and responsive, the water governance system should be transparent, inclusive, coherent and equitable. The first step of building a governance network is to identify what is the spectrum of actors and their concerns and visions for the future of water in their region. The next step is to bring all actors together and motivate their collective action toward a sustainable environmental management. Motivation can be brought up through awareness raising and knowledge dissemination activities.

The entity of actors can be regarded as a “policy-making community”. The intention is to ensure that the interests of all relevant stakeholders are given a voice, and to strengthen the communication and interaction channels among the actors. This will provide the ground for an interactive dialogue, education, and action.

Types of actors – overview

A governance system has more capacity to achieve effective and legitimate solutions when it is characterized by collective action, i.e. by integrating diverse voices (ideally representing the full range of interests in the society), and by ensuring that they are informed and empowered to take part in the governance process. Such a system is characterized by well-networked working relationships among jurisdictions; agencies representing different sectors; business, education, social equity, and ethics interests; the non-profit sector; and advocacy organizations (Innes and Booher 2003).

The following list is an example of how a representative governance network may look like. Some of the actors that are particularly relevant to the water management of the city of Turin are identified:

- Consumers – they could be organized into consumer groups/associations according to their water use (e.g. private households, public organizations, commercial enterprises, etc), or according to their district of residence. Such an organization is important for people in order to perform management tasks and influence overall management. In the Region of Piedmont, there are several consumer associations active in defence of consumer’s health: *ADICONSUM*, *ADOC Piemonte*, *FEDERCONSUMATORI*, *MOVIMENTO*

*CONSUMATORI, MOVIMENTO DIFESA DEL CITTADINO, and CITTADINANZ@TTIVA Regione Piemonte*¹.

- Water industry – since the industry is usually the carrier of a considerable amount of resources, its role can be seen in at least three dimensions: as a service provider, developer of technologies, and investor. In Turin, the enterprise *Società Metropolitana Acque Torino S.p.A.* (SMAT) provides integrated water services – from engineering and construction to monitoring the water quality. Furthermore, the company is involved in environmental education and information initiatives.
- Scientific community – represented through educational and training institutes. For example, *Hydroaid – the water for development management institute* educates for the optimization of the management of hydraulic resources.
- Local advocacy groups to which water is a relevant issue – e.g. environmental NGOs (water as a habitat), religious organizations (sacred water sites), etc.
- Regulatory authorities at different levels - municipal authority, regional authority, other local authorities within the watershed. It is important to have a coordination mechanism among those institutions in order to avoid managerial gaps or double standards. Some of the relevant water management authorities for the region of Turin are: *Regional Council of Turin, Municipality of Turin, Piedmont Regional Agency for Environmental Protection, ATO² of Turin, and Po River Basin Authority.*

These stakeholders are accountable for ensuring sustainable water services, which are compatible with the development of the society and the cultural and economic features of the region.

Direct Public Participation

Some stakeholders have more access to decision-making than others. Politicians can form coalitions, business associations can have lobby groups, NGOs can organize campaigns. However, it is more difficult to integrate citizens directly in the policy-making process. This may be due to the general consideration that the governmental bodies represent the public adequately. Yet in reality, this is not always true. That is why direct public participation has been gaining considerable importance as way to bring more accountability, adaptability, responsiveness and legitimacy in the decision-making process.

¹ The information is from the website of SMAT S.p.A

² ATO is the acronym of „ambito territoriale ottimale“, which means „optimal territorial unit“

Accountability

Edoardo Croci, a Research Director at the IEFE (Centre for Research on Energy and Environmental Economics and Policy) at Bocconi University, summarizes the importance of public participation as follows:

Public participation in environmental decision making constitutes a great value as it provides enrichment of administrative processes, encourages social learning, expands policy options, facilitates accountability and transparency, provides consensus on administrative matters, and therefore it contributes to guarantee compliance and enforcement³.

Adaptability

One of the most important transformations undergone in urban water services (UWS) in the last 20 years has been the shift to integrated management focused on sustainability. Achieving sustainable outcomes, however, is not only a matter of technical and managerial innovations. It requires that the institutional, political and social spheres adapt on a basis of cohesion, trust, legitimacy, and consensus (Massarutto 2006). This process of adaptation could be shaped by enlargement of the participatory domain, i.e. through an open participation (Swyngedouw et al. 2002).

Responsiveness

In explaining the concept of governance capacity, Innes and Booher (2003) point out the importance of a well-developed civil society, with citizens who are able to come in dialogue among themselves, who are informed observers and commentators, and who can influence the public policy according to their concerns. A governance system with capacity can learn, experiment, and respond creatively to threats and opportunities.

Legitimacy

The multifunctionality of water – as a basic natural resource for human life and ecosystem services, as an economic good for agricultural and industrial development, as a social right that has to be equally shared – implies that there are difficult allocation choices to be made. If the established water appropriation mechanism, according to which the demands of the various users of water are met, is not capable of responding to changes in the ecological water availability or to the societal needs, conflicts may emerge. It is possible to minimize their occurrence, if the existing set of rules is designed in a way that is socially acceptable and sustainable in the long-term. Such a design entails to incorporate the perspectives of different representatives of the civil society in it.

³ Statement during the Congress on Public Participation in the Implementation of the Water Framework Directive 2000/60, Milan, 30 May 2005. The quote is drafted by Chiara Sorisi, Gruppo 183.

Operationalizing Public Participation

The meaning of public participation can range from passive access to information to active involvement in the decision-making process. The former way of participation is characteristic for Italy, as a report by WWF in the end of 2003 reveals. Apart from the publication of legislation texts and plans in official gazettes, consultation on draft documents is done only if compulsory by law or within specific frameworks. To reverse this tendency, instruments for active public participation should be applied.

Public participation needs to be carefully managed to avoid capture by minority or particularly articulate groups, otherwise the decision making would be overly influenced by groups with limited legitimacy. There are two prerequisites important for a beneficial public participation process – extensive representation of civil society groups, and a participation mechanism.

The variety within the civil society group should be well represented. Citizens with different professions and financial situation, residents of different districts, natives and emigrants to the region – these groups have their own problems along the water supply and sanitation chain; they correspond to different water consumption patterns, perceptions of risks, affordability of costs, and attitudes toward environmental sustainability. Without taking this divergence into consideration, it will not be possible to achieve a common sustainable water policy in the long-term.

Due to this complexity, public participation has to be institutionalized, modelled and administered (Massarutto 2005). The design of the participation methodology should be adapted to the local features and problems for discussion. An adequate expertise should be employed, and there should be a budget established to meet organizational needs.

There are numerous methods for public participation and consultation, for example - citizen juries, citizen panels, planning cells, public hearings, citizen advisory committee to the political decision-makers, referenda, and so on. The following section will introduce one method to operationalize public participation – the so called *Future Workshop* (from the German term *Zukunftswerkstatt*). The methodology is also known as *Future Search*.

Future Workshop

The concept of *Future Workshop* enables people (also those, who have little experience with processes of decision-making) to develop new ideas or solutions of social problems. Most often, it is applied to involve citizens in spatial planning process. The future workshop is a

task-focused planning meeting, in which up to hundreds of people can take part. It is spread over three days and divided in several phases:

1. Critique phase: All participants investigate the problem together through a common visualised brainstorming, e.g. through a mind-map. The most relevant trends are identified, and critical questions concerning the problem are posed. This phase is important, as it gives the participants a holistic picture of the problem.
2. Focus on present: The participants are divided into groups (according to interests or special needs) and describe what they are currently doing about some of the key trends, and categorize their actions into “being proud of” and “being sorry about” them.
3. Fantasy phase: Each group of participants, while imagining that they are in a utopian world, formulates its ideal future scenarios (that would serve best their needs).
4. Implementation phase: the ideas of the groups are collected and discussed with all participants to agree on common ground. After the evaluation, the ideas are tailored into implementation plans.

The greatest advantage of the *Future Workshop* is that it stimulates creativity, visionary thinking, and innovative planning in a relatively relaxed and open setting. The members of the civil society are thus given an opportunity to express their ideas and critiques, and their choices are integrated in the decision-making process. The *Future Workshop* generates a collaborative working process towards a specific goal. The three-day presence of the participants, however, is often a challenge to motivate involvement. This participation method requires trained facilitators.⁴

Conclusion

The objective of creating a functioning governance mechanism is to include an optimum variety of interests in the water resource management planning. An essential condition is to achieve an active dialogue among the actors and to involve them in collaborative actions. Applying the *Future Search Workshop* is one pathway to the objective. The proposed method has to take into consideration the regional particularities; nevertheless, it could set an example for other localities and thus accomplish a wider engagement of the civil society for sustainable water management and sustainable development as a whole.

⁴ For more information on Future Search, see: <http://www.futuresearch.net/index.cfm>

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