

FULL CASE STUDY REPORT

Title of case

River Dialogue: Testing innovative public participation methods – citizens’ jury and focus groups in Estonia

Subtitle

New approaches to increase public participation in the implementation of the EU Water Framework Directive; the results of testing two specific participatory methods of citizens’ involvement - focus groups and citizens’ juries in Estonia, river Emajõgi region.



Description

In IWRM the major challenge is to successfully integrate the natural and social sciences, and to develop methods to improve stakeholder and public participation. It is important to explore new directions and instruments for participation in order to involve all groups concerned. EU funded research project River Dialogue (www.riverdialogue.org) tried to identify the best approaches to increase public participation in the implementation of the EU Water Framework Directive, through testing two specific participatory methods of citizens’ involvement - *focus groups and citizens’ juries*.

A Focus group is a planned discussion among a small group of people on a specific topic. Obtained information is asked on social interaction, and the group setting allows individuals to use the ideas of others as cues to more fully elicit their own views.

9 focus groups on water management issues with all major stakeholder groups in the Emajõgi river basin were conducted in the year 2004.

A Citizen’s Jury is a randomly selected panel of citizens, which meets for 3-5 days to carefully examine an issue of public significance through discussions, examinations of information, and questioning of witnesses. The members of the jury are given the chance to hear views and receive information from a variety of expert witnesses. Finally, the jury presents their recommendations to the problem issue. A Citizen’s Jury in Emajõgi River region was organized on the topic of water transportation, based on the results of the focus groups and several discussions with environmental authorities of the region.

Lessons learned

- There is a lot of hesitation and uncertainties among the local people and the politicians about new public participation methods.

- The selection of the proper method is of key importance, in order to achieve the high commitment of stakeholders and to achieve the best results. Focus groups and citizens' juries have been proved to be suitable methods to use in different socio-economic, cultural and political backgrounds, in order to achieve higher public participation in water management planning.
- Important aspect of a Citizen's Jury is that it promotes political dialogue aimed at mutual understanding, which does not mean that people will agree, but rather that they will be motivated to resolve conflicts by argument rather than other means. The way people reached the recommendations has to be considered at least of similar importance as the recommendations themselves. The feeling that someone is so much interested in the opinions of citizens', came as a surprise to a number of participants.
- The citizens' jury proved very well that people, when thinking together in a pleasant constructive atmosphere, prevent conflicts and, by way of compromises, reach solutions. And these people do not all have to be experts.

Importance of case for IWRM

The case describes how local people, who are not specialists, can take part in discussions and decision making process of complex environmental issues.

The case shows that new innovative approaches are necessary to be used to implement EU WFD under the IWRM principles.

Tools used

A2.2 Implementation and Enforcement

C3.2 Stakeholder Analysis

C8.2 Raising Public Awareness

Keywords

Innovative public participation methods: focus groups, citizen jury; implementation of the EU Water Framework Directive,

MAIN TEXT

1 Problems

Last decade has been for decision makers an intensive period for exploring new directions and instruments aimed to increase public participation in environmental matters on the global scale. A rapid growth of interest in public participation has been seen in a wide range of sectors – air and water protection, biodiversity, etc. Public participation has also gained wide recognition as a key principle for modern environmental resource management. In water management according to the Dublin Statement (second principle): “*Water development and management should be based on a participatory approach. ... Decisions are taken at the lowest appropriate level, with full public consultation and involvement of users in the planning and implementation of water projects*” (The Dublin Statements, 1992).

Raising of public awareness and close involvement of it into decision making would result in less costly and more effective water protection because people would understand the relationships between their activities and the impacts of it on water bodies and the stakeholders would feel a sense of ownership to the objectives that they've contributed to when developing it. The decisions would also be of better quality since the interests of various stakeholders would be balanced as much as possible and local knowledge of problems together with local experience would be reflected in decisions.

However, experience shows that for participation to be effective it has to have real impacts on the ground. Without concrete results obvious to stakeholders at the local level maintaining active involvement becomes more difficult.

Especially difficult was/is to start public participation in post- soviet countries, where there is no long history of deliberative democracy. In these countries public involvement is often declared in speeches and policy documents but the real meaning of this concept has not been fully realized by the governmental officials, but often also by the public itself. The major problem is that among water managers there is not enough knowledge about practical and effective approaches to public participation and empowerment, and about tools that enable the public to make informed decisions in water management. There is also little awareness about different methods and channels how to involve various stakeholder groups and this is especially true when talking about new EU member countries/new democracies. In order to develop new methods of participation, which take into account the needs and characteristics of different stakeholder groups the three-way communication between policy- and decision-makers, stakeholders and public, and scientists, cannot be overestimated. The quality of public participation must therefore be increased and communication strategies must be refined.

In order to respond to these new challenges **River Dialogue** project was started with participation of Linköping University (Sweden), Free University Amsterdam (the Netherlands) and NGO Peipsi Center for Transboundary Cooperation (Estonia). The project was implemented in 2003-2004 and was aiming to identify the best approaches to increase public participation in the implementation of the EU Water Framework Directive. The project also aimed to support the discussion between the scientists, decision-makers involved in managing European waters, and the public in understanding the challenges of water use and protection.

The project was implemented in three regions of Europe: in two “old” EU member countries – Sweden and the Netherlands; and one new EU member country –Estonia. Selected river basin case studies - the Motala Stroem in Sweden, the Emajõgi River in Estonia, and IJsselmeer basin in the Netherlands - represent diversity of cultural and socio-economic contexts in Europe in which the proposed approach can be implemented.

2 Decisions and Actions Taken

The River Dialogue pilot project was prepared by Linköping University, Free University Amsterdam and Peipsi Center for Transboundary Cooperation in order to study and test new innovative public participation methods in environmental decision-making. The pilot project was implemented in 2003-2004 with the funding from European Union 5th Framework Programme.

The project objectives were:

- a) To study whether/and with what kind of tools it is possible that the citizens take counsel together about what policies and environmental decisions ought to be taken in their watershed.
- b) To identify the best approaches to increasing public empowerment and involving the public in the implementation of the EU Water Framework Directive and river basin management plans
- c) To carry out focus groups and citizen juries in three European river basins: the Motala Stroem in Sweden, IJsselmeer - in the Netherlands and the Emajõgi River in Estonia.
- d) To develop guidelines for the organization of citizens’ juries and other forms of participation as part of the development and implementation of the EU Water Framework Directive.

Focus Group

A Focus group is still a rather unknown research tool within environmental management as it is more used in market and social science research.

Focus Groups can be widely defined as groups that have been designed to obtain perceptions on a defined area of interest in a permissive, non-threatening environment. Focus Groups can be suitable method for getting a brief understanding of an area not previously covered.

Focus group is a planned discussion among a group of six to eight people on a specific topic, which lasts one to one and a half hours. In a relaxed atmosphere and with the guidance of a moderator a group share their ideas and perceptions. The group members influence each other by responding to the ideas and comments of others. For the participants this methodology offers an excellent possibility to learn from the experience of the other group members. The advantage of the focus group over the in-depth interview is the fact that it is possible to obtain information more quickly because there are fewer meetings to plan and, more importantly, group work enables people to use the ideas of others to express their own opinion more clearly. Another advantages of focus groups over one-on-one interviews is that information obtained is asked on social interaction, and the group setting allows individuals to use the ideas of others as cues to more fully elicit their own views.

In summer 2003, Peipsi CTC conducted 9 focus groups on water management issues with the all major stakeholder group in the Emajõgi river basin, Estonia. Our interviews with environmental organizations, schoolchildren, owners of the recreation homes, fishermen, farmers, officials from local authorities, water recreation groups, NGOs and with people from the water tourism companies concentrated on understanding and possible influence of different stakeholders on water management issues.

Focus Groups were gathered mostly using the existing networks of interest groups. Peipsi CTC research team also used the meetings of fishermen, NGO representatives, farmers and schoolchildren as the Focus Groups' discussion sites. People's initial reaction, when they were invited to participate in the Focus Groups, was rather positive as they appreciated the interest in their opinion on the water management as well as because of the fascinating format of focus groups.

The topics discussed in the focus groups dealt how the participants understand water management, what the situation in the River Emajõgi area was like and which environmental problems there were. We also asked people to comment on some articles about water and express their opinion of the availability of information on water problems. Likewise, we investigated how we ourselves could influence water management and what should be changed in the present management of water resources. Finally, we also researched what the impact of the EU could be on the Emajõgi basin and more generally, on water management in Estonia as well.

The focus groups showed that the most important issues for local inhabitants are: poorly developed infrastructure, unclean river banks and poorly regulated water-transportation. In many focus groups, the conflict of interest between environmentalists and tourism and water transportation companies emerged.

Focus groups proved to be an effective approach that could be used on the water management planning stage to collect opinions of stakeholders about major issues in a river basin. Focus groups also helped to increase an awareness of water issues among participants and secondly participants had an opportunity to voice their opinions.

Citizens' Jury

A Citizens' Jury is a randomly selected panel of citizens, which meets for a couple of days for the careful examination of an issue of public significance in the locality.

The idea behind Citizens' juries is that given enough time and information, ordinary people can make decisions about complex policy issues

The idea of a citizens' jury is to get a small group of citizens together and present them with a certain question. They hear evidence, question witnesses (presenters about the topic from different angles/interest points) and then discuss the issues raised amongst themselves and make an informed judgment (recommendations). The citizens' jury allows the participants to learn in depth about one or a number of issues relevant for the public. The important aspect of this public participation method is that it promotes political dialogue aimed at mutual understanding, which does not mean that people will agree, but rather that they will be motivated to resolve conflicts by argument rather than other means.

In Estonia citizens' jury was organized on a topic "Water transport on River Emajõgi in the Alam-Pedja Nature Reserve. What would be the compromise between the interests of

environmentalists, entrepreneurs and local inhabitants?” .The topic was formed based on the results of the focus groups and several discussions with environmental authorities of the regions.

The citizens’ jury took place for two days, in November 2003, with participation of 14 randomly selected people from the river region. Before the Jury, one pre-meeting also took place.

Important methodological aspect in organizing a citizen jury is random selection of participants rather than voluntary involvement. In River Emajõgi case we sent out 700 questionnaires and invitations to the citizen jury to randomly picked addresses. The feedback was 6%, which was not too high, and this might be caused by the fact that the tradition of public participation in Estonia is quite new and people might feel estranged when receiving an invitation to the citizens’ jury, as they do not know what it is all about. Citizens’ jury is also quite demanding for the participants in the sense that participation requires preparation, the event tends to last several days, and demands intensive concentration.

In Estonia, the citizens’ jury took place for 2 days. Participants listened to the presentations of witnesses from different sectors and stakeholder groups, involved on the issues regarding the development of water transportation on the River Emajõgi – from River Port, public authority, environmental NGOs, local businessman. The idea is to give the overview of the problem from very many different and even conflicting interest and organizations. After each presentation people had chance to give questions and give their own concerns and arguments about the topic.

At the end of the witnesses session, local people worked in groups, to compile their recommendations on water transportation issue. The results showed that the inhabitants of Puhja and Rannu rural municipalities are in favor of developing water transport on the River Emajõgi, but they also consider it extremely important to consider the natural environment and the interests of local people. All together one page of recommendations was prepared by the citizens.

The Jury evaluation showed that the way people reached the recommendations has to be considered at least of similar importance as the recommendations themselves. The feeling that someone is so much interested in the opinions of citizens’, came as a surprise to a number of participants – it also evidences the fact that the ideas and methods of public participation are not yet wide-spread in Estonia. Several witnesses mentioned that this was the first time for them to listen to the opinions of local people, regarding the issues of water transport, and that they were surprised to see the extent of people’s awareness. Both the witnesses as well as the jurors stressed that the great advantage of the event was the fact that the Peipsi CTC assembled the specialists from various fields in one room. The citizens’ jury proved very well that people, when thinking together in a pleasant constructive atmosphere, prevent conflicts and, by way of compromises, reach solutions. And these people do not all have to be experts.

3. Outcomes

Use of focus groups and citizens’ juries in water management planning was first this kind attempt in Estonia. Obviously, at first there was a lot of hesitation and uncertainties among the local people and the politicians about these new public participation methods. This shows that participatory principles and practices are not yet wide-spread, at least at local level, in Estonia. However, the River Dialogue project results make us to believe that these methods can be successfully used in environmental management. In the following paragraphs I am going to analyze the main successes and problems encountered in organizing focus groups and citizens’ juries; as well as their cost-effectiveness and the sustainability of these methods.

Focus groups outcome

The tangible results and more general outcomes could be drawn from experience of focus groups. In practical terms, after each of nine focus groups a report was prepared summarizing the main concerns of this specific group on water management issues in the Emajõgi river basin. As the result one summary report was prepared, bringing together concerns from

different stakeholder groups. This report was taken into account when preparing Lake Peipsi water management plan. Report was sent to all relevant institutions: Ministry of Environment and its county departments, local authorities, NGOs, river authorities and river port etc.

The results of the focus groups were also used in order to prepare for the citizens' jury.

However, it is also very important to note, that the River Dialogue project experience showed that more or less all groups experienced that the focus group contributed to increasing their awareness of water and water management, simply by discussing the topic. Those groups, which were more affected by water related issues and had a relatively good knowledge of the topic (environmental organizations, local authority specialists) viewed the focus groups more as a forum where they had the opportunity of discussing and voicing their opinions.

Additionally, for several groups, the focus groups seemed to be a way of acknowledging the problem of water management and at the same time to recognise possibilities to work in the field of water management.

Focus groups proved to be an effective approach that could be used especially on the water management planning stage to collect opinions of stakeholders about major issues in a river basin. Nine focus groups in Emajõgi basin helped us to collect public input in to developing solutions of water management problems.

Citizens' Jury outcome

As with focus groups, the citizens' jury results and outcomes of the process could be seen at different levels.

- In the course of the organization process, we received a great deal of positive feedback from environmental authorities, officials of the Ministry of the Environment and even from the entrepreneurs dealing with water transport on the Emajõgi River who were very much interested to learn more about this method and the whole process, as well to receive the report of the Jury and the recommendations by the citizens.
- After the event the report of the citizens' jury with the recommendations was sent to relevant ministries, environmental authorities, rural municipality governments, NGOs and the enterprises dealing with the development of the River Emajõgi. . Citizens' jury report was also taken into account when preparing Lake Peipsi water management plan and was also taken into consideration in River Emajõgi regional planning.
- Very important outcome of citizens' jury is connected with increased environmental knowledge mainly by the jurors/citizens but also by the witnesses/presenters who represented different professions and sectors
- As very positive follow-up to the citizens' jury, intense communication continued both with the jurors as well as the witnesses. On their own initiative, the citizens' organized a Christmas party roundtable, inviting the jurors and the organizers. River Emajõgi shores cleaning campaign is also planned by the citizens.

However, there were also some negative aspects and disadvantages connected with this public participation method. First of all, the citizen's jury is that it is quite expensive method and it is quite time- demanding process as the preparation of the jury started four month before the event. Therefore the cost-effectiveness of the method should be taken into consideration while planning the research. It is wise to use Citizens' jury method only when dealing with complex issues, where are several conflicting interest and stakes. For smaller problems this method is too resource (man power, finances, knowledge) demanding.

Additionally, in the beginning of the process we had a lot of hesitation and uncertainties in because earlier, citizens' juries had not been organized in Estonia according to this methodology and there was no certainty as to how the Estonian audience would accept this. In addition, local people and the politicians are not yet too accustomed to the principles of public participation.

To summarize it should be stressed that participation does not just happen. On the contrary, it must be actively encouraged and river basin authorities must be prepared to devote time to careful planning and to invest meaningful financial and human resources. The process could

be quite time consuming and expensive in the short-term, but it will save money in the long-term.

4. Lessons learned and replicability

Focus groups' and citizens' juries' effectiveness as a participatory method

To begin with, we can say without hesitation that the River Dialogue project showed that the focus groups and citizens' juries is a good methods for enhancing public participation in water management. However the effect of the focus groups and citizens' juries, in increasing public involvement, depends also largely on the motivation of the participants. Therefore, a one time approach - taking part in focus group or citizens' jury discussion cannot fully change their attitude towards the issue at stake. Information dissemination and direct involvement has to be continued also after some bigger events such as citizens' jury. Obviously, there is a tendency that the groups having a natural interest in water issues thus tend to get more involved in water management and they are more interested to make an effort and take part in the focus groups' type of activities.

The focus group and citizens' juries are definitely a good source of information on groups' opinion of the water management issues. Focus groups and citizens' juries as methods for public participation enhancement can be especially emancipative for societies in transition from the command ruling to the democratic state of the art. Therefore, it can be highly recommended to use focus group method in post soviet societies.

Focus groups and citizens' juries can also be viewed as the *as information channels and awareness-building tools*. Via sharing experiences and points of views the participants expand their understanding of an issue at stake. Awareness on the water management problems is the basis for recognising the need to act for improving the current situation. In terms of increasing the awareness of water amongst the ordinary public, communicating more information about water related issues has to be highlighted as important.

Recommendations for conducting focus groups

Focus groups demand detailed planning from the beginning and a flexible time schedule during the process. River Dialogue focus groups showed that these are very time consuming activities. Careful planning and the recruitment process, as well as processing and interpreting gathered information, take time.

The focus groups recruitment phase, as well as the information gathering process itself is quite time consuming process. In the recruitment phase the first contact and the explanation of the rationale of the focus groups plays a great role in feeling inclined to participate. It must be noted that participation in the process demands also great interest as well as time investment from the participants. Therefore, the clarification and good reasoning work raises the willingness to participate.

It could be helpful to try to find the members of the focus groups from already existing networks. In that way, the leaders of the network or interest group can be used as the contact persons. Focus group participants, with a homogeneous background, are more inclined to share their opinions with each other. Therefore, it is understandable that discussions in a pre-existing network are more lively and open. This also contributes to stimulate an informal atmosphere for discussion. From negative side, homogenous groups, consisting of participants with more or less shared views and interests with regards to water related issues, obviously contribute to the opinions being similar. Therefore the diversity of the information is also lower. Also, the learning effect in a pre-existing group discussion is minimal.

Recommendations on using a Citizens' Jury

The Citizens' jury is definitely a more direct method for public participation in water management than the focus group is. In a Citizens' jury, the members of the jury are set forth with a situation where they have to come up with informed policy-decisions themselves. However, River Dialogue experiences show that participants have a surprisingly large capability to master relatively complex issues and a fresh perspective on the issues at hand.

Important aspect of a Citizen's Jury is that it promotes political dialogue aimed at mutual understanding, which does not mean that people will agree, but rather that they will be motivated to resolve conflicts by argument rather than other means. The way people reached the recommendations has to be considered at least of similar importance as the recommendations themselves. The feeling that someone is so much interested in the opinions of citizens' came as a surprise to a number of participants. The citizens' jury proved very well that people, when thinking together in a pleasant constructive atmosphere, prevent conflicts and, by way of compromises, reach solutions. And these people do not all have to be experts. This case describes how local people, who are not specialists, can take part in discussions and decision-making process of complex environmental issues, after good presentations and possibility for give questions to experts.

Citizens' juries could be used in different societies and in a variety of problems. Conducting a Citizens' Jury will be probably more welcome in the countries where the participatory methods have not been introduced yet and the public has not had the chance to influence the policy decisions to a larger extent. Though, participatory methods of citizens' juries are most effective in the sense of empowerment of the jury members in the societies where the deliberative democracy is still to be introduced. Its deliberative effect on the participants is most evident among the participants that have never had a chance to voice their opinion in an official seminar on certain issues. Nevertheless, the application of the citizens' juries outcomes might meet reluctant responses of representative democracy in newly democratised societies as well as where the democracy and its mechanisms are well established. The effect of the participatory methods is lower in the countries where there is an abundance of such kind of attempts.

As a summary it should be stressed that new innovative public participation methods should be tested and taken into wider use. The selection of the proper method is of key importance, in order to achieve the high commitment of stakeholders and to achieve the best results. Focus groups and citizens' juries have been proved to be suitable methods to use in different socio-economic, cultural and political backgrounds, in order to achieve higher public participation in water management planning. Water governance without citizens (informed!) input and responsible members of the public LACKS legitimacy

5. Contacts, references, organisations and people

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