



THE HANDBOOK FOR THE PARTICIPATION OF STAKEHOLDERS AND THE CIVIL SOCIETY IN THE BASINS OF RIVERS, LAKES AND AQUIFERS

March 2018



Box 27: River Dialogues in Austria: Communication and successful implementation

Since 2008, 13 "River Dialogues" have taken place in 10 river basins in the four Austrian states: Upper Austria, Carinthia, Styria and Salzburg.

In July 2012, the first international river dialogue "Untere Salzach" started between Austria and Bavaria. This Dialogue was successfully implemented. On this basis, other activities were developed in Germany (Bavaria and Baden-Württemberg).

Public information and consultation is one of the cornerstones of the EU Water Framework Directive and Flood Directive. Austria has complied with the relevant provisions of the Directive and with those of Article 14, which aims to promote the stakeholders' participation in the implementation of the Directive. It started a "river dialogue" process, in addition to the more formal measures planned in the Directive.

A special challenge for Austria

The high water quality and the abundance of the resource in Austria characterize the country as a "water nation". In recent years, significant investments have been made to achieve high standards in drinking water supply and sanitation.

The result is that water pollution has more or less disappeared. Waters are now clean and transparent. All the lakes have a good bathing quality. Currently, the focus is on river ecology and the natural conditions of rivers. For centuries, Austrian rivers have been subjected to alteration of the banks and river bed correction for hydropower, protection against floods or for converting wetlands into arable land for food self-sufficiency.

To comply with the new orientation towards river ecology, other investments, often very expensive, will be needed to achieve a "good ecological status" or a "good ecological potential". The prerequisite for obtaining a certain willingness to pay is to raise public awareness. Austria is at the forefront of the successful implementation of awareness raising strategies in the water sector. This was a prerequisite for the "River Dialogue" model. The methodology was further refined according to the requirements of the European Water Framework Directive and its regionalization.

Approach

"Only one person who speaks to another is able to implement successful projects". The River Dialogue echoes this testimony. It is a highly qualified method with a highly regional and individual approach. So far, the dialogues have informed stakeholders and the general public of a specific river basin and raised awareness, and even more, allowed a better understanding of the hydrological measures taken, planned for the future.



The river dialogue was launched in 2008 by the Austrian Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry, Environment and Water Management, in collaboration with the Upper Austria Lander. Through this dialogue, all citizens were invited to express their personal vision of the future of the river. It is no coincidence that the River Dialogue was very much appreciated. On the one hand, the

personal relationship to the river is usually important.

On the other hand, the elements of the process were considered in detail and evaluated: as a first step, the stakeholders, as representatives of water management, fisheries and nature protection services, presented their vision of the watercourse. In a second phase, the citizens of the entire river basin were invited to give their opinion in an online survey. The third step was defined by a

Box 27: cont'd

local conference - the real dialogue - between the public and regional stakeholders and the representatives of the water management units of the ministry and of the federal states.



What is the added value of the Dialogues?

All parties involved are active members of the process: specific topics are discussed with strong reference to practice, the public acquires a broader picture of the overall context, and their concerns become transparent to the government and politicians. The river dialogue is an advantage and a chance for all participants to get information and discuss their individual experience.

In addition, the figures show a strong acceptance of river dialogues: since 2008, more than 2,200 regional stakeholders in 200 municipalities have been invited to take part in the dialogues. More than 11,000 people participated in the online survey. In total, about 1,500 participants attended each river dialogue. About 440 reports on the conferences have been published.

4.4 Developing events that foster public participation

By organizing events open to the basin population, the basin organizations can raise the civil society awareness on the situation of water resources, on the basin status, the problems encountered, the solutions imagined. It is also a way to develop a vision of the entire basin shared by the majority of its inhabitants and stakeholders, necessary for the actions envisaged in the plans and programs to receive wide approval.

It may also promote the initiatives that some stakeholders or groups of the civil society have implemented in all or part of the basin, e.g. to conserve the biotope, to promote water savings, or to protect the basin against pollution.

Events can take various forms: exhibitions, forums, videos, days dedicated to the river, a day for cleaning the river bed and banks.

Box 28: Great Lakes - St. Lawrence Gulf Symphony

The Great Lakes - St. Lawrence Gulf Symphony is a citizens' initiative aimed at raising awareness on the Great Lakes, St. Lawrence and Gulf Basin and on protecting the basin's water resources. This territory, which extends from the western tip of Lake Superior to the Gulf of St. Lawrence, involves six Canadian provinces and eight American states. Coordinated by the International Secretariat for Water (ISW), the project promotes the many local, regional and transboundary initiatives on water management in a densely populated river/lake basin. It attempts to define the conditions wished for the future according to a participatory process open to all. It is also an opportunity for citizens to express themselves on the water issue