

Focus groups as an innovative method of public participation - EE

1. Policy Objective & Theme

- SUSTAINABLE USE OF RESOURCES: Preserving coastal environment (its functioning and integrity) to share space
- SUSTAINABLE ECONOMIC GROWTH: Balancing economic, social, cultural development whilst enhancing environment

2. Key Approaches

- Participation

3. Experiences that can be exchanged

The case describes how local people, who are not specialists, can take part in discussions and the decision-making processes of complex environmental issues. Focus groups can be used in different societies and in a variety of problems and are probably more suitable in countries where participatory methods are not widely used.

4. Overview of the case

Focus groups were used in Estonia as a means of bridging the gap between major stakeholders concerning decisions of river basin management. Nine focus groups in the Emajõgi basin helped to collect public input into developing solutions of water management problems. They proved to be an effective approach that could be used especially at the planning stage to collect opinions of stakeholders about major issues in a river basin.

5. Context and Objectives

a) Context

The Emajõgi River is 101 kilometres long with 10 rural municipalities (average population of 1000-2500) and one city (100,000 inhabitants) lying near the river. There are extensive untouched natural areas with two wetland nature reserves.

Public participation has gained wide recognition as a key principle for modern environmental resource management. However, in most central and eastern European countries, there is no long history of public participation. One major problem is that amongst ICZM managers there is not enough knowledge about practical and effective approaches to public participation and empowerment or about the tools that enable the public to make informed decisions in coastal management issues. There is also little awareness of the different methods and channels which are available for the involvement of various stakeholder groups.

A Focus group is still a rather unknown management tool within ICZM as it is more often used in market and social science situations. It is a planned discussion among a small group of people on a specific topic. Information is obtained through a social interaction setting, and the group situation allows individuals to use the ideas of others as cues to more fully elicit their own views.

b) Objectives

Focus groups have proven to be a suitable method to use as a participatory method in different socio-economic, cultural and political situations although they have largely been confined to the social sciences. Therefore, the approach was used to

achieve higher public participation in water management planning.

6. Implementation of the ICZM Approach (i.e. management, tools, resources)

a) Management

The work was done by the Peipsi Centre for Transboundary Cooperation in cooperation with Linköping University, Sweden and the Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam, Netherlands.

b) ICZM tools

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. They can be a suitable method for getting a brief understanding of an area not previously covered. It is generally 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 advantages of the group setting are that it is possible to obtain information more quickly because people can use the ideas of others to express their own opinion more clearly and information obtained is by social interaction.

In 2003, Peipsi Centre for Trans-boundary Cooperation conducted 9 focus groups on water management issues with all the major stakeholders in a river basin. The discussions involved environmental organizations, schoolchildren, owners of recreation homes, fishermen, farmers, officials from local authorities, water recreation groups, NGOs and people from the water tourism companies. Focus groups demand detailed planning from the beginning and a flexible time schedule during the process. The focus groups conducted showed that they are very time consuming activities; the planning, recruitment process, as well as processing and interpreting the gathered information, all take time. The focus group's recruitment phase, as well as the information gathering process itself are very important parts of the process. In the recruitment phase, the first contact and the explanation of the rationale of the focus groups plays a great role in participants feeling inclined to participate. Participation in the process also demands an interest as well as a time investment from the participants. Therefore, it is important to carefully set out the reasoning and necessity for the participation.

7. Cost and resources

No costs are available.

8. Effectiveness (i.e. were the foreseen goals/objectives of the work reached?)

Focus groups proved to be an effective approach that could be used in the water management planning stage to collect opinions of stakeholders about major issues in a river basin. They helped to increase an awareness of water issues among participants and the participants had an opportunity to voice their own opinions. It was found that taking the focus group members from already existing networks was helpful since they can then be used as the contact persons. Focus group participants, with a homogeneous background, are also 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. However, it does have the disadvantage that these participants have a tendency to have like-minded viewpoints. Therefore, the final diversity of the information is also less and, therefore, the learning effect in such a group discussion is not as great.

9. Success and Fail factors

The initial reaction, when the stakeholders were invited to participate, was positive as they appreciated the interest in their opinion on water management as well as because of the novel format of the groups. Nonetheless, there was still some hesitation and uncertainty among the local people and the politicians about the process. 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 have proven to be suitable to use in different socio-economic, cultural and political backgrounds, in order to achieve higher public participation in water management planning.

In practical terms, after each of the nine focus groups a report was prepared, summarising the main concerns of the different stakeholder groups on water management issues. This report was taken into account when preparing the Lake Peipsi water management plan.

10. Unforeseen outcomes

The focus group contributed to increasing the awareness of water management by the participants. 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 the possibilities to work in the field of water management.

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13. Sources

- Focus Groups and Citizens' Juries: River Dialogue Experiences in Enhancing Public Participation in Water Management. Tartu 2004 (available at http://www.ctc.ee/index.php?menu_id=274&lang_id=2)
- <http://www.gwptoolbox.org>
- http://riverdialogue.ctc.ee/index.php?tree_id=1



Focus Groups and Citizen Juries (1.69 MB) 