

Public participation in flood protection planning
About the problematic nature of involving local people

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Public participation is a key element in modern river management. Quality, progress and democratic legitimacy are arguments in favor of public participation. It is therefore that the European Union, for example, made public participation a corner stone of its Water Framework Directive and Flood Risk Directive. But making it a corner stone, doesn't make it easy. This article explores the difficulties concerning public participation in flood protection planning in river basins. The article will conclude that the nature of river basin planning leads to resistance and problems with local people and communities. From there it will outline specific strategies for bending local resistance into trust.

Why river basin management is problematic for local actors?

The basis of the analysis in this article is the river basin scale of planning³. Quality of environment and a sustainable development ask for this river basin planning in which problems in rivers are investigated with a system approach. This approach on a river basin scale is necessary to prevent undesired effects of measures in other parts of the river basin. From a governance perspective this approach implies that decision-making in river management takes place on a river basin scale. National and regional authorities are leading in developing plans and making a package-deal that leads to specific measures to ensure flood-protection in the whole basin. Decision-making will lead to an agreement on the package-deal which is in practice mostly an agreement between these national and regional authorities.

First, this river basin agreement has consequences for local actors, such as municipalities, farmers and inhabitants. There are two possibilities: they live or they don't live in the part of the basin where measures are to be taken. Mostly, only a few measures are necessary to protect against flooding in the whole river basin. This implicates that only a few local actors 'lose' because measures are taken on their territory. These actors protest but can't avoid the measures, because therefore the river basin package-deal has to be breached. The protests

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³ The analysis about the role of local communities in river basin planning is based on current phd-survey at Technical University of Delft, Faculty of Technology, Policy and Management (see also [Roovers, 2011]).

only lead to resistance, anger and 'dialogue of the deaf'⁴. The other local actors, as well as regional and national actors, are 'winners'. No measures on their territory, while safe against flooding.

There is a second aspect important. It is difficult to involve local actors from the start: there are too many local actors to involve them all. To involve some municipalities as representatives is difficult too: finally the decision is about in which municipality measures are taken, and in which not. For a representative this raises the question about the conflict of general interest vs. personal interest.

So, the river basin approach has consequences for local actors: the river basin decision-making process leads to a lot of winners, and only a few local losers. And local losers will be involved late, mostly at the moment the river basin package-deal is already agreed upon. At that moment they will not be able to break the package-deal. The only result therefore, is resistance without success, polarization and mistrust between local actors and national authorities. This is the starting point for implementing the desired measures on a local scale.

How to participate with actors in a situation of resistance and mistrust?

To implement the desired measures on a local scale, a further dialogue with the local people is necessary. This raises questions about how to bend local resistance and suspicion into trust and co-operative working on improved local plans. Cases show that this is possible. Starting, we mention three theoretical insights.

1. The benefits of public participation.

Making the public part of the decision making process can be done for three reasons:

- I. There is a juridical argument that is based on preventing affection of public interests. This can be translated as the formal ways for having a voice in the decision-making process.
- II. There is a moral argument that involving the public can be done to strengthen the democratic degree of decision-making. The government can improve the legitimacy of the decision-making process and to fulfill the wish of the public for more direct influence on the content of public policy.
- III. The third argument for public participation are the benefits which can be gained for the government. The benefits are (Pröpper en Steenbeek, 1999):
 - o Enrichment of content, because of the cooperative thinking capacity of citizens, useful in several parts of the process.
 - o Understanding and support for (parts of) the policy helps in the relation between government and citizens.
 - o Improving the intern process; by drawing citizens into it. New ways of cooperation can be found and some imperfections will be brought to light.

⁴ a discussion in which each party is unresponsive to what the others say.

2. Levels of public participation.

There are different kinds of participation to be distinguished, in which the level of participation differs. There are different kinds of reasons for public participation, each having their own level(s). The levels can be seen as a continuum with to be informed and no interaction between stakeholders on one side and having a role of full value in the decision-making process with a lot of interaction. In between there are levels like consulting, advising and co-producing. Figure 1 gives an overview.

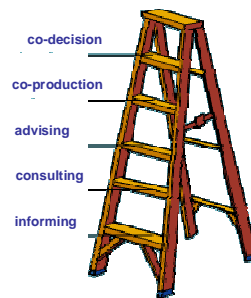


Figure 1: Overview of the levels of public participation (following Edelenbos e.a, 2006)

3. The rules for designing a successful participation process.

There are four main aspects concerning a successful participation and decision-making process (De Bruijn e.a., 2008): progress, content, security and openness. These aspects are needed to create an environment in which trust can develop. De Bruijn e.a. indicate fifteen rules for designing such a successful process. By using these rules the four mentioned aspects can be created. The table shows the four main aspects and some relevant rules.

| Aspect | Explanation and some of the rules |
|----------|---|
| Progress | The process must contain incentives for progress and for reaching goals. |
| | Make sure there's something to gain for everybody, create incentives for joining the process. |
| | Save the most disputed decisions to the end, avoid a hostile sphere in the beginning. Create a sense of urgency to cooperate. |
| Content | The issues that will be discussed aren't limited beforehand. The participants choose the topics, everything is relevant. |
| | Insights in content are facilitating, the roles of experts and research come together and separate at given moments. |
| Security | The core values of participants must be respected and protected. |
| | Commitments can be postponed, in order to avoid the feeling of being entrapped. |
| | The process has exit-rules about the participation, actors can leave whenever they want. |
| Openness | The process must be clear and transparent for all actors involved. |
| | All relevant parties should be invited to participate. |
| | Content becomes part of the process. |
| | Process and process management are characterized by transparency and openness. |

Two examples of bending local resistance into trust

Example 1: the redevelopment of the Heesselt flood plains at River Waal⁵

In the late nineties the Heesselt flood plains in the Netherlands became part of a government program concerning the river Rhine and its branches. The program was set up to create new nature in the river area on one hand, and to contribute to flood protection on the other hand. After years of struggling between government and inhabitants, in 2007 the project was restarted. The goal was to create 200 hectares of new nature combined with a certain storage capacity at high discharges by redevelopment of the Heesselt flood plains. And additional: to do this while bending local mistrust into public acceptance of the plan.



Figure 2: Public participation at Heesselt, River Waal. An impression of the final plan, made by landscape-designers of Bureau Strooming. And a picture of a public design session together with local inhabitants.

Between this restart and the first plans from the late nineties, several procedures were started and different designs were made. But the local people kept skeptical about the plan and the way they were involved by the government.

In the restart, a public participation process was designed, that had to lead to the demanded results. It contained seven public design sessions for which citizens as well as other local actors were invited. The levels of participation were:

- *Informing*: In the first sessions the supervisors told what they were going to do and what they were not going to do. Besides that they told the people what they could expect and what was expected from them.
- *Advising*: The people were asked which issues and cares they wanted to discuss and what they didn't want to discuss. The supervisors took all their input into the designing process.
- *Consulting*: when the first drafts of the plan were made, the supervisors showed them. They explained why some issues were taken into account and why some hadn't been given a place in the design. Those citizens present were asked for their opinion.

⁵ Authors were the designers and supervisors of the public participation process at Heesselt.

The sessions were set up with the rules for a successful process in mind. All relevant parties could join the sessions (*openness*). Those who were invited and joined the session could leave it whenever they felt they had to leave (*exit-rules*). The rules of the game were made clear every session. E.g. the things that were said were registered anonymously (*transparent process*). The issues dealt with attracted the invited people (*make sure there is something to gain*). In the beginning experts were asked for their knowledge and input to create a direction (*content makes the process*). This was taken into the session with the local participators when they were asked for their ideas. The ideas were taken into the designing process and in a later session the participators could see and react on the result(s). The most contested issue of the plan, the safeguarding of maintenance of the flood plain after the redevelopment, was dealt with several times. But only at the end of the process, decisions about this could be made (*save the most contested decisions for the end*).

The local citizens had their doubts: about the needs of the redevelopment, they didn't feel taken seriously in the past, according to them the government didn't communicate well, they were not happy with earlier plans, etc. After the restart this mistrust was bent into trust. The result is that still not everybody accepts why the project is needed, but given the fact that the redevelopment will continue, they support the new design.

Example 2: the bypass Veessen-Wapenveld at River IJssel⁶

December 2006 the Dutch Parliament decided on a large program of measures to improve flood protection on all Rhine delta branches in the country. Forty measures all over the area were chosen, mostly measures to create more room for the rivers. A river bypass at Veessen-Wapenveld, River IJssel, was one of these measures. The measure consisted of a green river through agricultural grounds, which should discharge river water from river IJssel at high discharges. The bypass would make agricultural grounds less worth and would cut off two villages, which would be surrounded by river water at high discharges. The measure was fiercely contested by local farmers, inhabitants and municipality. Especially farmers and inhabitants were late informed about the measure, and used all kinds of opposition to get the measure undone. At the end, the measure was still decided upon, but the relation between government, farmers and inhabitants was highly polarized.

To implement the measure the project team faced a huge challenge. To develop a high quality plan for the bypass and to develop local acceptance and participation in the planning process, public participation was necessary. But how to develop public participation in this hugely polarized situation? An additional problem was the dominance of the minority voice: the opposition was led by farmers, not willing to give up their position and think about chances a bypass could generate. How to give the silent majority a voice too? And how to look for local value added to the bypass, such as recreation opportunities, cycling routes, etc.?

⁶ Authors were in different roles involved in the planning and public participation at the bypass.

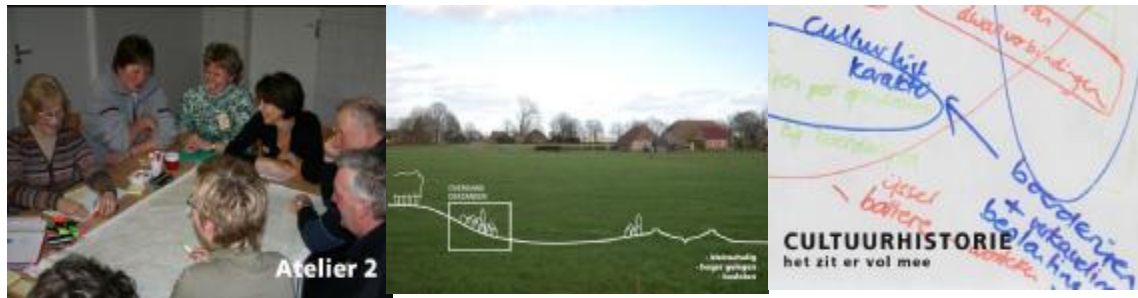


Figure 3: Public participation at Veessen-Wapenveld. An impression of a public design session with inhabitants to make a spatial quality plan. Picture and drawings by landscape-designers of Veenenbosch and Bosch.

To deal with these issues the project team decided to start with a broad scan of local opportunities connected with the bypass, and to use a mix of public participation levels. Using just one level of participation, the project team considered, would not do justice to the diverse aspects of the issues at stake and would not give the silent majority their voice. With these choices, the project team accepted further resistance of, especially, farmers. To give the silent majority their voice, accepting further resistance was unavoidable. The chosen levels of participation which were used, were:

- *co-production*: for example the spatial quality plan for the bypass was made together with inhabitants;
- *information*: the results of further study on hydrology, for example, were presented to the inhabitants;
- *advising*: inhabitants were able to advise the politicians about which extra measures they would like to add to the bypass to develop extra local value.

By using these mix of participation levels the project team succeeded to give the silent minority a voice, to add local value to the plans and to reduce the initial resistance. Nevertheless this resistance, especially from the farmers, never really disappeared.

Summary: The success factors of bending the resistance into trust

The river basin approach needs decision-making on a river basin scale. The package-deal which is made between national and regional governments only affects a few local actors. They can't break this package-deal. The only results are resistance without success, polarization and mistrust between these local actors and national government. While implementing these measures, there are possibilities to bend this mistrust and resistance into trust: create a successful decision-making process with openness, content, progress and security as guidelines. And strengthen this by using a mix of participation levels. In Heesselt at River Waal still not everybody understands why the project is needed, but given the fact that the redevelopment of the flood plain will continue, they can live with the new plan they helped constructing. In Veessen-Wapenveld, River IJssel, the project team succeeded to give the silent minority a voice, to add local value to the plans and to reduce the initial resistance.

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