

PUBLIC PARTICIPATION IN OAS-MANAGED BASIN PROJECTS

BACKGROUND

Public participation refers to the interaction between government and civil society through different mechanisms to design, evaluate, and implement development policies, projects, and programs. Participation could be either direct, or indirect through legitimate intermediate institutions or representatives; it needs to be informed and organized. This means freedom of association and expression on the one hand, and an organized civil society on the other hand.¹ Public participation is a key component of good governance.

Governance is the process of decision-making by which decisions are implemented (or not implemented). Good governance² means that this process is participatory, consensus oriented, accountable, transparent, responsive, effective, efficient, equitable, inclusive, and that follows the rule of law in order to ensure that corruption is minimized, the views of minorities are taken into account and that the voices of the most vulnerable in society are heard in decision-making. It is also responsive to the present and future needs of society.³

The Department of Sustainable Development (DSD) is committed to ensure broad participation of civil society in sustainable development, following the principles established in the OAS Democratic Charter.⁴ The Charter helps governments define how environmental protection should be pursued. This includes supporting good governance and participation of civil society (Art. 27), institutional transparency (Art. 4), public participation (Art. 6), integral development (Art. 12) as well as the full participation of women (Art. 28). The Charter also provides the context in which to make tangible progress in sustainable development. Furthermore, the DSD follows the principles established in the *Inter-American Strategy for the Promotion of Public Participation in Decision-Making for Sustainable Development*.⁵ These principles highlight several key conditions that are necessary to promote the success of policies and practices of public participation, which require firm, ongoing commitment from government and civil society.

Mechanisms for public participation include consultations, partnerships, seminars, workshops, working groups, working meetings, modern communication media (e.g. email, virtual consultation forums), interviews, surveys, and meetings with institutions, among others.

¹ United Nations Human Settlements, in: <http://www.unescap.org/huset/gg/governance.htm>

² Major donors and international financial institutions have based their aid and loans on the condition that countries undertake reforms that ensure “good governance”.

³ Principle 10 of the 1992 Rio Declaration states that “environmental issues are best handled with the participation of all concerned citizens at the relevant level.” In Agenda 21, the plan of action accompanying the Rio Declaration, governments pledged to pursue broader public participation in decision-making processes and policy formulation for sustainable development, understood as development that meets our present needs without compromising the ability of future generations to meet theirs.

⁴ Article 6: “It is the right and responsibility of all citizens to participate in decisions relating to their own development. This is also a necessary condition for the full and effective exercise of democracy. Promoting and fostering diverse forms of participation strengthens democracy.” Article 15: “The exercise of democracy promotes the preservation and good stewardship of the environment. It is essential that the states of the Hemisphere implement policies and strategies to protect the environment, including application of various treaties and conventions, to achieve sustainable development for the benefit of future generations.”

⁵ ISP basic principles for public participation are: 1) Proactivity; 2) Inclusiveness; 3) Shared Responsibility; 4) Openness throughout the Process; 5) Access; 6) Transparency; 7) Respect for Public Input. See Annex A for a description of each principle.

PUBLIC PARTICIPATION IN DSD PROJECTS

The OAS/DSD, in partnership with participating member States, the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), the Global Environment Facility (GEF), and local representatives is supporting the implementation of participatory and decentralized projects for the integrated management of water resources in the transboundary river basins in the Americas, in projects such as the **Bermejo River, Guarani, San Francisco, San Juan, and Pantanal - Upper Paraguay**. A key component of these projects was stimulating and ensuring the participation of local communities in the formulation and implementation stages of the projects. The public participation process represents a hallmark of these projects.

A comprehensive approach and a wide range of modalities were used to achieve high levels of public involvement and commitment from basin stakeholders, including:

- direct participation in the project design phase;
- coordination and execution of demonstration projects and feasibility studies;
- recruitment of local experts for the project activities;
- organization of thematic events and technical meetings, education and training activities;
- public consultations and validation of the Strategic Action Program (SAP) process;
- dissemination of information and project results through video documentaries, printed material, and publications;
- promotion of public-private and government-community dialogues and partnerships; and
- establishment of permanent public participation mechanisms in the basins.

At the same time, the projects recognized the specific characteristics of the social, economic, and cultural groups in the basins, adopting different approaches to involve and promote their participation in the projects and in the management of the basin.

BERMEJO RIVER BASIN

The Bermejo River Basin Project, financed by the GEF, provides technical and financial assistance to the governments of Argentina and Bolivia to formulate and implement a SAP for the Binational Basin of the Bermejo River. The objective of the project is to promote sustainable development, and to help alleviate the main environmental problems affecting the basin, particularly the degradation of soil and water resources. The SAP put forward by both governments represents a comprehensive 20-year, US\$470 million proposal that seeks to address these major environmental issues and to promote sustainable development of the basin.

To help lay the groundwork and initiate the implementation process, a small number of high priority actions were selected from each program component, and subsequently approved for GEF financing. Actions are grouped in four categories: (i) environmental protection and rehabilitation; (ii) sustainable development of natural resources; (iii) institutional development and strengthening and, (iv) public awareness and participation.

Different mechanisms for public participation were implemented during the SAP formulation phase, including seminars, workshops, working groups, working meetings, modern communication media, interviews with key individuals, surveys, meetings with institutions, and direct participation in pilot demonstration projects and community activities. The implementation of these mechanisms varied depending on the objective, the issues under consideration, and the context. They differed

according to its application: defining priorities and proposals, validating results, demonstration projects, or public consultation on specific issues.

This component has helped identify and coordinate the interests of basin stakeholders, providing access to information, and encouraging active community involvement in the management of the Basin's natural resources. Also, the project initiated implementation of a comprehensive and integrated environmental education program relating to the sustainable use of water and other natural resources, both through formal education processes (incorporating environmental variables in academic curricula), as well as through workshops, seminars, meetings, manuals, brochures, media, etc. Achievements include:

- Implementation of an environmental education plan in the basin provinces, through the establishment of formal agreements with the Ministries of education of Salta, Jujuy, Chaco, and Formosa. This has resulted in the incorporation of sustainable development concepts into the formal educational curricula of 500 elementary and primary schools, and providing training to 2,400 teachers.
- Design and implementation of a Communications Plan for the Binational Commission, seeking to generate awareness and promote the participation of stakeholders in sustainable water management practices throughout the basin.
- Developed an environmental education program for the Department of Tarija (Bolivia), in collaboration with the Juan Misael Saracho Autonomous University.
- Signed interinstitutional agreement between the Ministry of Education, the Tarija Prefecture, and the National Technical Office for the Development of the Pilcomayo and Bermejo River basins for implementation of the implementation of the environmental education program in the Department of Tarija.

In the first stage of the Bermejo Project 12 workshops were held, 4 in Argentina and 8 in Bolivia for a total of 1.069 participants. 80 consultants and experts were involved plus 260 specialists. In the second stage of the SAP formulation 18 workshops were held with the participation of 914 stakeholders, along with the participation of 774 representatives of peasants' communities. Bermejo can be considered as an inclusive project, having involved a big portion of the community, not only in workshops and meetings, but also in educational programs. However, every pilot project was different, causing that the number of participants varied depending on the topic of the workshop or the meeting.

GUARANI AQUIFER SYSTEM

The Guarani Aquifer System (GAS) constitutes one of the largest reservoirs of groundwater in the world, with current water storage of approximately 37,000 km³ and a natural recharge of 166 km³ per year. It is located in the eastern and mid-southern South America and underlies in some areas of Argentina, Brazil, Paraguay and Uruguay. Approximately 24 million people live in the area delimited by the boundaries of the aquifer and a total of 70 million people live in areas that directly or indirectly influenced it. The main use of the aquifer is for drinking water supply, but there are also industrial, agricultural irrigation and thermal tourism uses. The long term objective of this project is the sustainable management and use of the GAS in Argentina, Brazil, Paraguay and Uruguay, through an adequate and functional management framework, based on appropriate technical, scientific, institutional, legal, economic and environmental guidance.

A specific component of the project was created to promote, support and enrich the participation and involvement of the public and stakeholder communities by fostering environmental and water education, social communication, and dissemination of knowledge about the GAS and the project.

Different mechanisms for participation and public consultations were undertaken during the project. Some of the agencies involved in the process included the Superior Council of Direction of Project comprised by three representatives per country from the areas of environment, water resources, and foreign affairs; the “Colegiada Coordination” comprised by the National Coordinators from the countries involved in the Project; the National Units of Project Execution. Other activities in the public participation component include:

- Design and implementation of regional participation plans and development of social communication manual for the project.
- Establishment of a Guarani Aquifer System Citizen’s Fund, which supports the development of strategies and concrete actions for spurring and strengthening environmental education and participation of community-based NGOs.
- Creation and dissemination of instruments to increase awareness, interest and commitment among stakeholders, with particular emphasis on measures to involve children and youth.
- Indigenous Peoples Strategy to provide information for indigenous people about the project and the necessity of water quality protection of the aquifer. This strategy will be informed by preparatory studies, consultations and discussions with key indigenous actors.

Local experience

Pilot projects under this component were supported through local commissions created for this purpose. For instance, 500 participants attended the meeting for the launching and planning of the Ribeirao Preto pilot project.

SAN FRANCISCO RIVER BASIN

The San Francisco River Basin (SFRB) in Brazil covers an area of 636,920 km², draining areas of the States of Minas Gerais, Goiás, Bahia, Pernambuco, Alagoas, and Sergipe, as well as part of the Federal District. Along its nearly 2,900 km length, the river crosses a diverse region, both in terms of its climatic and physical characterization and in terms of its environmental and social diversity. A portion of the basin is in the semi-arid Northeast Region of Brazil, where the San Francisco River, with an annual average flow of 2,850 m³/s, accounts for roughly two-thirds of the freshwater available.

The São Francisco River Basin and its Coastal Zone are areas of strategic importance to the development of a vast region, marked with by socio-economic disparities and environmental vulnerabilities. The optimization and harmonization of various types of water uses - generation of electricity, shipping, irrigation, fishing, tourism and leisure, dilution of wastes, household and industrial water supply, mining, and others, including ensuring adequate flows for environmental uses- has been a constant challenge for the basin stakeholders.

The project design, based on extensive public consultation carried out through regional planning workshops, comprises four components: (i) River basin and coastal zone environmental analysis; (ii) Public and stakeholder participation; (iii) Organizational structure development; and (iv) Watershed Management Program formulation. In addition, the following crosscutting issues permeate the project execution: information sharing and dissemination; quantification of water use,

use conflicts, and hydrological management; and financial mechanisms. The project has been executed in direct partnership with 4 Federal institutions, 3 State bodies, 4 Universities, and 4 NGOs, in the context of institutional participation of more than 450 institutions.

The public participation process has been the single biggest success story of the project. Starting from the project design phase, through the execution of the demonstration projects and studies, up to the DAB/SAP formulation and validation process, the constant and enthusiastic involvement of the broadest range of basin stakeholders has assured the consistency, continuity, and legitimacy of the process, the broad acceptance of its final results, and the high probability of a successful and sustainable implementation of the SAP. Moreover, the crosscutting bottom-up process of river basin planning and management provided an opportunity for the creation and implementation of effective structures, legal controls, and fiscal instruments to mitigate land and water management practices that degrade water quality, modify the hydrological and hydraulic characteristics of the basin, and/or adversely affect the water resources of the Basin and its coastal zone. Furthermore, by creating the Basin Committee for the São Francisco River Basin (CBH-SF), also called *Water Parliament*, the project supported the establishment of a permanent mechanism for public participation in the basin. More than 6,600 stakeholders were directly involved in the mobilization process leading to the establishment of the CBH-SF. The main achievements and success indicators in this respect also include:

- Participation of more than 12,000 people and 483 organizations in the events of public participation during the execution of the activities and the development of the DAB and the SAP, revealing the high interest of the public and stakeholders in issues related to the Basin.
- Participation of 594 representatives from 191 organizations concerned with the development of the Basin, distributed as follows: 15 federal, 40 state, 36 municipal and 80 non-governmental organizations, and 20 private companies in the process of SAP validation and adoption.
- Comprehensive thematic mapping of the Lower, Lower-middle, and Upper São Francisco, providing detailed knowledge of the land-use structure in the area and its relation to the classes of vegetation cover and the state of the environment.
- Establishment of a dialogue process between the government, the agricultural sector, and the organized civil society in the Rio das Fêmeas sub-basin on the issues of water rights and conjunctive use of underground and superficial water resources and in order to facilitate implementation of water use charges.
- Development and implementation of a partnership between the community and the government for the design and implementation of economic reforestation projects and promotion of soil conservation practices in the pilot-area of the Municipality of Luz.
- Training of more than 4,000 people throughout the basin on different water resources issues, including the support to the effort of ANA to prepare the basin population and the organized civil society for the establishment of the Basin Committee and the election of its members.

SAN JUAN RIVER BASIN

Shared by Costa Rica and Nicaragua, the San Juan River Basin encompasses about 38,500 km², including its associated coastal zone on the Caribbean Sea. Most of the land area of the Basin is below 500 m, characterized by extensive plains that climb slowly from the Atlantic Coast to the Central Volcanic Cordillera, the waters of the Lake Nicaragua-San Juan River system flow through

at least eight distinct terrestrial ecosystems. In addition, the San Juan River Basin and its Coastal Zone (SJRZ) includes a range of freshwater and marine ecosystems including rivers and their tributaries, freshwater lagoons, the marine littoral zone, middle shelf, and continental slope.

The SJRB has a population of about one million, who are generally below the poverty-line, lack access to safe drinking water, adequate sanitation, and schools. All economic and quality-of-life indicators are significantly below the national averages for both Costa Rica and Nicaragua. These poverty conditions are worsened by the threats of hurricanes and tropical storm as well as volcanic and seismic activity. These natural hazards add risks to the freshwater supply. In addition, recent studies indicate that climate variability is an aggravating factor to transboundary migration, as inhabitants of areas subject to periodic flooding and drought use this coping mechanism as their only resort for adaptation to climate variability.

The main objective of the SAP is to ensure that water resource goods and services are available to satisfy present and future needs. It also seeks to guarantee the conservation of as agreed by all the parties involved. Proposed activities for the formulation of the SAP rely on the findings of the Transboundary Diagnostic Analysis (TDA) that was carried out during preparation of the Project Brief. The formulation of the Strategic Action Program (SAP) for the Integrated Management of Water Resources and the Sustainable Development of the SJRB relied on three working elements: (1) basic studies, (2) demonstration projects, and (3) public participation workshops. The SAP integrates three crosscutting issues: (1) gender, (2) human transboundary migrations, and (3) vulnerability to natural hazards.

A strong component of the project is its support to public participation. The public participation and gender equity component of the project was based on the principles of the Inter-American Strategy for Promoting the Public Participation in Decision-making for the Sustainable Development (ISP): Proactivity, Inclusiveness, Shared Responsibility, Openness throughout the Process, Access, Transparency, and Respect for Public Input. The public participation process evolved from rounds of consultations during the PDF-Block B phase for the drafting of the TDA to a direct involvement in the formulation and execution of the demonstration projects and basic studies. During the PDF-Block B phase, about 221 institutions were directly involved in the execution of the activities: 97 governmental, 29 non-governmental, 22 international organizations, 14 academic/research institutions, 3 cooperatives, 14 grass-root organizations, 14 private companies, 20 local governments and 8 media organizations. About 340 individuals, including government officials, scientists, water experts, consultants, and members of the community also participated on the project activities.

The gender analysis has identified gender-related conditions of the use, access, control, and decision-making with regard to water resources by men and women. The analysis relied both on census data and surveys, as well as on primary data gathered through a series of workshops and by observation of demonstration projects. More than 61 events were held with the participation of about 200 people. The gender analysis contributed also to the research carried out by the Central American University on human migrations, as these two issues are closely inter-dependant.

PANTANAL UPPER PARAGUAY

The Paraguay River Basin, part of the La Plata River Basin, encompasses an area of 1,095,000 km², straddling the borders of Brazil, Argentina, Bolivia, and Paraguay. The Upper Paraguay River Basin covers an area of approximately 600,000 km², of which, 362,376 km² are in Brazil, encompassing large portions of the States of Mato Grosso and Mato Grosso do Sul. The Basin is of essential strategic importance within the context of water resources management in the countries that share its waters (Brazil, Bolivia, and Paraguay).

The main objective of the Project is to promote the formulation and implementation of a Strategic Action Program (SAP) for the Integrated Management of the Pantanal and Upper Paraguay River Basin. The project activities are designed to enhance and provide protection to the environmental functioning of the predominant ecological system, protect the wetland biodiversity, and implement strategic activities that address the root causes of environmental degradation. The strengthening of basin institutions responsible for water resources management in the Basin, the generation and dissemination of information, and the integration of environmental concerns into economic development activities on a sustainable basis are key elements of this project. The project is composed of six components: (i) water quality and environmental protection; (ii) conservation of the Pantanal; (iii) soil degradation; (iv) stakeholder involvement and sustainable development; (v) organizational structure development; and (vi) watershed management program implementation.

During the project design phase, three regional workshops were held in the Basin with the participation of more than 200 persons, representing 60 civil, corporate, nongovernmental and governmental entities (municipal, state, federal, and international). All relevant basin actors and communities presented proposals for project activities, many of which became integral part of the project by constituting its 44 activities. All demonstration projects and feasibility studies remained coordinated by the institutions that formulated and presented them. Thus, the project design and execution process established an active feedback and commitment from the main basin stakeholders in the project. The project has developed a rich and useful information base and has promoted a basin-wide dialogue and information sharing, helping manage conflicts and instructing public participation. At the same time, the project has been able to achieve strong stakeholder ownership and has developed management and monitoring instruments insuring good communication among five levels of players (the agencies executing project activities, the technical coordinator, the National Water Agency-ANA, OAS and UNEP). Critical to the current project accomplishments have been competent management at the various levels of the project, government commitment, effective information sharing, and systematic stakeholder participation. Project implementation benefited substantially from the local expertise including the scientific community from Federal or State universities, as well as technological units such as EMBRAPA and ANA. The project's emphasis on using existing institutions to implement activities has led to significant improvement of institutional capacities in the region.

The main project results and success indicators include: (i) Enhanced public and scientific awareness and knowledge of the Pantanal and the UPRB; (ii) Improved protection of the Pantanal and the river system and its biodiversity; (iii) Improved public and stakeholder participation through direct involvement of communities in the identification and implementation of remedial measures; (iv) Strengthened institutional framework and staffing capabilities of the state and local environmental bodies for sustainable environmental and water resources management; (v) Improved implementation of policy instruments, including water charges, for rational and sustainable water resources management and environmental protection in the Pantanal and the UPRB; (vi) Improved integrated water resources management and environmentally sustainable development in the UPRB.

The public participation process represents a hallmark of this project. A comprehensive approach and a wide range of modalities were used to achieve the high level of public involvement and commitment from basin stakeholders, including direct participation in the project design phase, execution of demonstration projects and studies, recruitment of local expertise for the project activities, organization of thematic events and technical meetings, education and training activities, as well as dissemination of information and project results through video documentaries, printed material, and publications. At the same time, the project recognized the specific characteristics of

the social, economic, and cultural groups in the basin, adopting different approaches to involve and promote their participation in the project and in the management of the basin. Thus, for example, the project organized and empowered the local fisherman communities, promoting the recognition of the professional category of the live bait collectors and their participation in the re-formulation of the State Law regulating capture and transport of live baits in the State of MS, as well as ensured their representation as members of the State Fishing Council. The project was also catalytic in promoting the involvement of NGOs in the execution of some of the key project activities related to eco-regional planning, biodiversity conservation, and sustainable tourism. The main achievements and success indicators in this respect also include:

- Development of an Environmental Education Program for the Tourism Sector in the Miranda River subbasin.
- Implementation of sustainable economic activities for live bait collectors and community economic and social empowerment.
- Development of aquaculture activities in the Taquari River basin as alternative means of economic production and a source of income for local fish producers.
- Implementation of an Environmental Education Program in local school and communities through education and training courses for local environmental agents.
- Preparation and broad dissemination of the video documentaries: *Introducing the Pantanal/Upper Paraguay Project*; *Ecological Corridor Pantanal-Cerrado*; and *Taquari River: Problems and Solutions*.
- Organization and holding of 116 public events, involving a total of 258 organizations and institutions (47 federal, 30 state, 55 municipal, 66 NGOs, 45 private enterprises, 3 international organizations, 12 foreign country institutions).