3B	
TRUST AND ENGAGEMENT	**Principle 10. Stakeholder engagement**

Target group / Relevant stakeholder: National Policy-Makers, Municipal Governments, Regulators, Urban Water Utilities, Medium Water Utilities, Rural Service Providers, Watershed or River Basin Organisations, User Groups, Networks or Platforms, and/or Private Sector

DESCRIPTION

Promote stakeholder engagement for informed and outcome-oriented contributions to water policy design and implementation (OECD, 2024a, 49).

EXPECTED RESULTS

Outputs:

- Mapping of public, private and non-profit actors who have a stake in the outcome or who are likely to be affected by water-related decisions as well as their responsibilities, core motivations and interactions (OECD, 2024a, 49).
- Special attention paid to under-represented categories (youth, the poor, women, indigenous people, domestic users) newcomers (property developers, institutional investors) and other water related stakeholders and institutions (OECD, 2024a, 49).
- Definition of lines of decision-making and the expected use of stakeholders' inputs, and mitigating power imbalances and risks of consultation capture from over-represented or overly vocal categories as well as between expert and non-expert voices (OECD, 2024a, 49).
- Capacity development of relevant stakeholders as well as accurate, timely and reliable information, as appropriate (OECD, 2024a, 49).
- Assessment of the process and outcomes of stakeholder engagement to learn, adjust and improve, including the evaluation of costs and benefits of engagement processes (OECD, 2024a, 49).
- Legal and institutional frameworks, organisational structures and responsible authorities are conducive to stakeholder engagement, taking account of local circumstances, needs and capacities (OECD, 2024a, 49).
- Customisation of the type and level of stakeholder engagement to their needs while keeping the process flexible to adapt to changing circumstances (OECD, 2024a, 49).

CONDITIONS FOR SUCCESS

- Institutional arrangements: Effective institutional and legal frameworks are key for sustainable service provision. In rural areas, small service providers require continuous technical support. Ensuring inclusivity and representation demands accessible and timely information, community awareness efforts, and respect for local knowledge (Jiménez et al., 2019).
- In urban areas, solutions are tailored to local contexts and empower users to influence service delivery aspects such as tariff setting. Service providers offer effective mechanisms for users to raise complaints, while accountable institutions are responsive to citizen's needs and demands (Jiménez et al., 2019).
- Budgeting and financing: Adequate financial resources are mobilised (Jiménez et al., 2019).
- Capacity development: Sufficient technical expertise supports participatory approaches (Jiménez et al., 2019).

BARRIERS

- Lack of political will and leadership (Akhmouch and Clavreul, 2017).
- Institutional fragmentation (Akhmouch and Clavreul, 2017).
- Consultation 'fatigue' (Akhmouch and Clavreul, 2017).
- Limited public awareness and capacity on water issues, challenges in engaging certain stakeholders (Akhmouch and Clavreul, 2017), and the technical nature of water consultations can hinder efforts to expand participation.

- Resistance to change: Government stakeholders dominate decision-making, limiting collaborative governance. Formalised processes and institutionalised approaches continue due to path dependence and reliance on established policy networks (Fritsch, 2019; Huntjens et al., 2011).
- Limited social trust, dominance by elites, unequal power dynamics, and exclusionary decision-making (Shunglu et al., 2022).
- In practice, engagement in water services has been less structured than in water resources management. It often consists of addressing customer complaints rather than fostering meaningful consultation through shareholding, governing boards, regulatory policies, or partnerships with citizens and users (Akhmouch and Clavreul, 2017).
- Conflicting water values (Kjellén et al., 2021; Dare and Daniell, 2017) result in misaligned objectives of stakeholders (OECD, 2015).
- Tokenism of many instances of stakeholder engagement (Arnstein, 1969; Friedman and Miles, 2006): There are gradients in public involvement (OECD, 2015; UNDP Water Governance Facility, SIWI, Water Integrity Network, 2013; Fung, 2006; Pretty, 1995). Basic consultations often have little or no impact compared to deliberation in public forums or stakeholder empowerment.
- Lack of trust in public institutions (OECD, 2024b) and political polarisation: Information asymmetries and lack of transparency undermine confidence (Akhmouch and Clavreul, 2017).
- Lack of trust in participatory approaches: Expectations of influencing the decision-making process are not met in practice (Reed, 2008). Societal actors may not be satisfied with rigid engagement frameworks, especially when their role in decision-making remains restricted.
- Complex public challenges: Persistent challenges like climate adaptation, environmental conservation or resilience building (Magis, 2010; Lebel et al., 2006).
- Lack of adaptability of public institutions to community initiatives: Public institutions often face challenges to adapt to community-led initiatives, by being reluctant they limit opportunities for co-production and collaboration (Edelenbos et al., 2015).

SOLUTIONS

- Creation of an enabling environment for participation: The enabling environment should consider the interplay between participatory processes and the specific contexts in which they unfold (Jiménez et al., 2019).
- Development of clear strategies outlining how stakeholder input can shape final decisions (Akhmouch and Clavreul, 2017): This includes defining decision-making mandates, engagement objectives, and the intended use of contributions.
- Establishment of water information systems and allocation of sustainable funding to maintain long-term engagement processes (Akhmouch and Clavreul, 2017).
- Investment in power and political analysis (OECD, 2014b): Designing politically informed, context-specific initiatives requires understanding socio-political power relations (Shunglu et al., 2022), local dynamics, and incentives (OECD, 2024b). A stakeholder network analysis can strengthen water governance by identifying key actors, promoting decentralised decision-making, and fostering consensus-based management (Jariego, 2024).
- Two-way information sharing through consistent and appropriate communication channels.
- Adequate financial and human resources while providing timely and meaningful information can support effective, results-driven stakeholder engagement. Regularly assessments can facilitate learning, adaptation, and improvement (Akhmouch and Clavreul, 2017).
- Investments in the democratic space promote inclusivity, reduce economic disparities, and strengthen media literacy and safety (OECD, 2024b).
- Co-creation: Joint production and delivery of public goods and services, where society, stakeholder groups, and government actors share responsibility and work together, can generate public value (Osborne et al., 2016).

- Expansion of engagement modalities by tailoring tools to the level of participation, available resources, and contextual needs (OECD, 2015): Methods include meetings, workshops, expert panels, web-based platforms, and regulatory consultations.
- Communities' self-organisation can foster partnerships with water authorities: Explore participatory spaces beyond formal institutions (Hasenbaum, 2024), such as social movements, hybrid online/offline engagement (Bussu, 2019), and "created spaces" for participation like project-, action-, and policy-oriented initiatives (Denters, 2016; Margerum, 2008).

EXAMPLES

Enhancing Stakeholder Engagement for River Restoration in Austria

SDGs linked

Water risks

The River Dialogue 2.0 project (2021-24) tackled challenges in river restoration across Austria by fostering public participation and stakeholder engagement. Led by the Federal Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry, Regions, and Water Management, alongside regional partners, the initiative sought to align technical planning with public understanding and support. Through social media outreach, online surveys, and participatory workshops, the project engaged over 450,000 people, gathering critical insights to guide river restoration efforts. This inclusive approach strengthened trust, improved decision-making, and facilitated broader acceptance of environmental restoration measures. Despite challenges in sustaining long-term engagement and finding local coordinators, the initiative successfully demonstrated the value of participatory governance in water management, influencing future policies and strengthening the country's water resilience.

Linkages to Governance Principles

The success of River Dialogue 2.0 highlights the critical role of stakeholder engagement in water governance, ensuring that diverse perspectives inform decision-making. Integrity and transparency were fostered through open dialogue and inclusive participation, building trust between authorities and communities. Data and information collection, particularly through surveys and digital outreach, provided valuable insights to shape policies and planning processes. Innovative governance approaches, such as leveraging social media for engagement, modernised public outreach and demonstrated new ways to strengthen participation in environmental decision-making.

Maximising NbS Opportunities and Enhancing Water Resource Protection through Stakeholder Collaboration in Belgium

SDGs linked

Water risks

In Flanders, Belgium, De Watergroep, the region's largest drinking water supplier, has played a pivotal role in enhancing water resource protection through stakeholder collaboration and the implementation of NbS. Faced with pollution from agricultural runoff and industrial discharges, particularly during drought periods, De Watergroep has actively engaged with government agencies, fellow utilities, research institutions, nature conservancy groups, and farmers to safeguard both surface and groundwater sources. While groundwater abstraction areas have regulatory protections, surface water remains more vulnerable, requiring collaborative governance efforts. The EU Water Framework Directive has facilitated stronger cooperation between utilities and regulators, allowing De Watergroep to bring a utility perspective into governance mechanisms and environmental permitting processes. By aligning NbS initiatives with regional policies and fostering

multi-stakeholder partnerships, the project has strengthened water resource management in a densely populated and cultivated landscape.

Linkages to Governance Principles

Stakeholder engagement has been instrumental in bridging sectoral silos, fostering cooperation between government agencies, water utilities, farmers, and civil society. Managing trade-offs has been key, particularly in balancing industrial and agricultural activities with drinking water protection. Policy coherence has helped integrate NbS within broader regional water security strategies and EU regulatory frameworks. Additionally, long-term financing remains a significant challenge, emphasising the need for sustained financial mechanisms beyond individual project cycles and political mandates to ensure the continuity of NbS interventions.

Stakeholder-Driven Approaches to Nutrient Pollution Monitoring in Germany

SDGs linked

Water risks

Agricultural nutrient pollution remains, as in other EU member states, a persistent environmental challenge in Germany, requiring robust assessment tools to support policy responses. The AGRUM-DE model network, developed by the Thünen Institute and its partners, Jülich Research Centre and IGB Berlin, is a national initiative that integrates agro-economic and hydrological models for tracing nitrogen and phosphorus emissions. With high spatial resolution (a 100x100m grid and at the municipality level), the model provides essential data for EU reporting requirements, supports management plans under the EU Water Framework Directive, and complements existing water quality monitoring systems. Over 20 workshops and regular stakeholder meetings with regional water and agriculture authorities have facilitated knowledge transfer and trust-building. The model's collaborative development, accompanied by 51 regional experts, emphasised transparency and iterative engagement, ensuring that its data and methodology were widely accepted by stakeholders. The project underscores the importance of integrating technical expertise with participatory governance to improve environmental decision-making.

Linkages to Governance Principles

Stakeholder engagement was critical to the model network's success, ensuring the inclusion of regional experts and building trust among agricultural and water authorities. Data and information management provided a solid foundation for transparent decision-making, while regular process evaluation enabled continuous refinement of the model. Integrity and transparency were reinforced through step-by-step data presentation and open dialogue with stakeholders. The model also contributed to circular economy principles by assessing nutrient flows and promoting more sustainable agricultural practices. Additionally, its role in mitigating nutrient pollution supports environmental resilience, demonstrating the interdependence of governance processes in addressing complex water challenges.

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