IWRM Action Hub

Civil Society Organisations

Summary

Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) are important stakeholders in IWRM as they represent the interests of diverse, sometimes underrepresented groups, of the public and communicate those concerns and preferences to decision-makers. Under the concept of public participation, CSOs are included in planning processes to improve decision-making and increase awareness, commitment, and accountability for the planned actions. This Tool provides an overview of the functions of CSOs and good practices for public participation in water management.

What are Civil Society Organisations?

Civil society organisations (CSOs) have gained more and more importance in influencing political decisions around the world. The UNDP describes CSOs as a third sector besides the public and private sector (UNDP, 2015). They play an important role in interconnecting the other two sectors which facilitates the communication of multiple stakeholders, a central part of IWRM. This can for example be realised by developing Multi-Stakeholder Partnerships (Tool B3.05). Including CSOs in IWRM ensures that public opinions and especially the perspectives of underrepresented groups are considered, for example women (Tools B5), youth (Tool C5.01) or indigenous people. Since CSOs include a broad range of organisations it is difficult to define them very narrowly. Some examples for CSOs are:

- Non-governmental organisations (NGOs)
- Community-based organisations

- Indigenous people's organisations
- Youth organisations
- Women's organisations
- Academia & research organisations

CSO's Key Functions

Those diverse CSOs fulfill several functions that make them valuable contributors to IWRM. The UNDP provides an overview of possible roles that NGOs, one of the most noticeable groups of CSOs, can perform (UNDP, 2016):

- **Mobilisation of public opinion**: They have the power to increase awareness and influence the public opinion on a certain topic.
- **Representation of the voiceless**: They can represent the interests of usually under represented civil groups like indigenous people, women and youth. And also encourage communication between civil and public actors.
- **Expert analysis and recommendations**: CSOs can communicate opinions of the civil society to governmental officials by providing information from outside of their usual sphere of awareness.
- **Response capacity to manage shocks**: CSOs are often more flexible than the government in reacting to shocks. They can provide fast responses and have the expertise to recommend the right actions in those situations.
- **Management and implementation**: CSOs can provide technical knowledge as they are often experts on certain topics. Therefore, they can be involved in operations, management and implementation of suggested projects.
- **Monitoring**: They can evaluate the success of negotiations and follow up on the compliance to commitments by the government.
- **Legitimisation of decision-making mechanisms**: By providing their expertise in decision-making processes, CSOs can increase the quality and legitimacy of decisions.

In addition to these roles, the UNDP also suggests some coordinative functions of Civil Society Organisations (UNDP, 2015):

- **Networking**: CSOs can take over a networking role by communicating and cooperating with other CSOs.
- **Serve as an Umbrella CSO**: CSOs can perform functions of coordination and representation of a group of CSOs.
- **Federations**: Different CSOs from the same area or with a common interest can join as federations to have a greater impact on a topic.

CSOs as Contributors to IWRM

In water resources management CSOs are especially valuable in four areas (Bouman-Dentener and Devos, 2015):

- **Investment and financing**: They contribute to investment and financing as they can provide inputs in the investment process which helps to use financial resources in a sustainable way. They can also help to maintain small infrastructures which increases the sustainability of investments.

- **Technology**: They can help to promote the right technologies for improved water resources management, provide expertise for the selection, and support their maintenance.
- **Capacity development and strengthening**: They help to recognize problems and to develop solutions in water management. Then they are able to communicate those findings in a more accessible way to the broader public which increases and strengthens capacity.
- **Governance**: They can improve water governance by enhancing the legitimacy of the decision-making processes.

Levels of Public Participation

The degree to which CSOs are involved in water management can be assessed with a "ladder of citizen participation" (Arnstein, 2019). It ranges from lower levels of non-participation to a middle area of tokenism to the highest steps of citizen power which involve partnerships, delegated power and on the highest level citizen control:
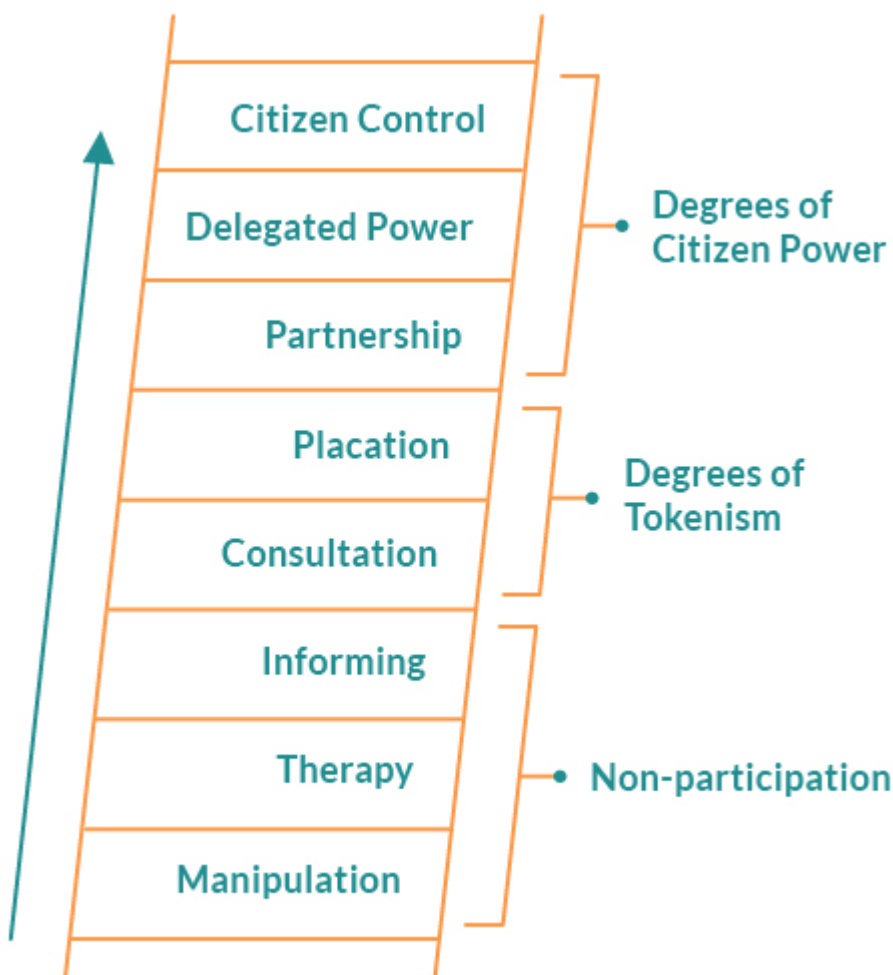
Figure 1: Ladder of participation (Adapted from Arnstein, 2019)

Related to water management, the purpose of public/citizen participation is to include the public in planning and working processes to improve decision-making, create awareness,

and increase commitment and acceptance of plans (EC, 2003). Participants from the public or CSOs can influence the issues that are addressed, improve the basis of information, help to form and create the planned actions, and the plan itself when they are included in water management planning processes (European Environment Agency, 2014). To facilitate this, it is important to ensure information supply and consultation in the process and to encourage the active involvement of CSOs:
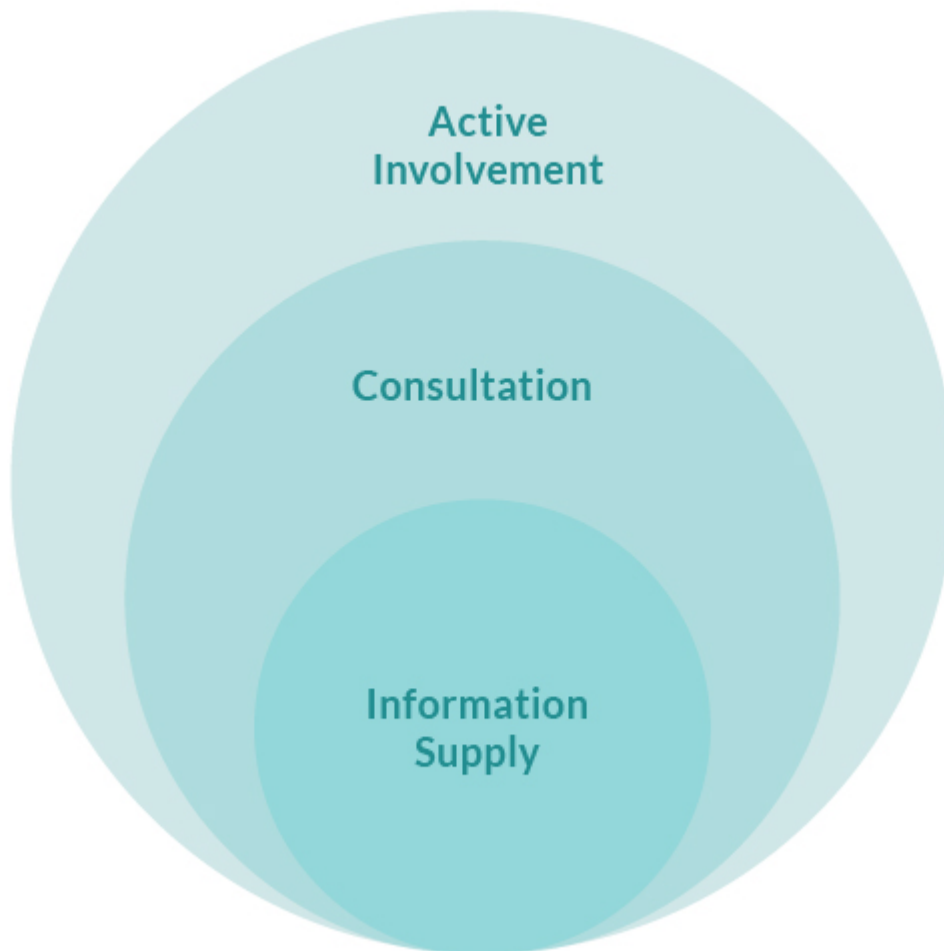

Figure 2: Public Participation (Adapted from EC, 2003)

There are, however, some obstacles that can hinder their successful citizen participation (Ianniello et al., 2019):

- Contextual factors like deficits and asymmetries of information and the mindset of government officials.
- Organisational arrangements, for example regarding community representation criteria and the design of the process.
- Process management patterns like group dynamics and the quality of collaboration.

Good Practices to Enhance Public Participation

To avoid and counteract these obstacles the following good practices for public participation in water management can be a good guidance (European Environment

Agency, 2014):

- There is no overall solution for every case because of different local, regional, and national environments. Therefore, public participation processes should be adapted to the context.
- Public participation should be supported early and in all stages of the planning process to make it most effective.
- Since the diverse participants have different skills and interests it can be useful to map different stakeholders according to their interests and priorities, for example by using stakeholder mapping as in in the guidance document by the EC (2003).
- The published information should be relevant for different groups of stakeholders to inform them how the measures will affect them.
- It is important to provide transparency in decision-making to encourage participation and acceptance of the decisions. It should be clear how the participation of the public will be used in the decision-making process.
- When different groups of the public have conflicting interests, it can be beneficial to facilitate between different parties to reach a consensus.

Thematic Tagging
Gender

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