

Improving public participation in flood risk management: experiences from the Schelde estuary case study

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There is an increasing notion that a valid flood risk assessment requires the involvement of the local public living in the area liable to flooding. Indeed, the new EU Floods Directive stipulates that all stakeholders must be given the opportunity to participate actively in the development and updating of the flood risk management plans. How to reach a satisfactory level of public participation, however, often leads to much discussion and confusion. Examples of good practice in participatory flood risk management are still scarce and theoretical guidance is only developing slowly. One of the key problems concerns the use of different types of knowledge and perspectives in discussions on flood risks between stakeholders, scientists and policy makers. Moreover, flood risk itself is only one of the components that plays a role in regional development plans and policies.

The Schelde estuary case study of the FLOODsite project was designed to explore the different perceptions and knowledge between the three actor groups in the region: the scientists, local citizens and regional and local policy makers. Information was gathered through semi-structured interviews with local citizens, a questionnaire and three different workshops with scientists, policy makers and citizens. Besides, new information was generated on future flood risk through model based scenario analysis. Key questions involved the local perception of flood risks, the attitude towards scientific knowledge on present and future flood risks and opinions regarding risk reduction measures.

The case study provided valuable insight in differences and communalities regarding flood risk perceptions among the different groups that participated in the study. We found a surprising body of local knowledge regarding the local environment, including flood risks, that could be very valuable in designing a flood risk management policy. We also found differences between local citizens and scientists with regard to possible future risk reduction measures, in the sense that citizens are more concerned about the criteria for the decision process than the scientists. There was also a marked difference regarding the expectance of the role of the government in case a flood would occur between respondents from Belgium and the Netherlands.

In order explain the observed differences it is of utmost importance to place the flood risk issue in a broader context. Important factors, which are briefly introduced in this paper, include the international dimension of the Schelde estuary, flowing from Belgium to the Netherlands, the role of EU legislation, such as the Habitat Directive and the historic flood of 1953. This flood played a decisive role in the way flood risk was managed over the last 50 years in the Netherlands. Although much of this policy remains valid up till now, we do see an emergence of other flood risk management concepts gaining importance in the discussion. Signs of transition towards a new policy could thus be identified.

This study provides valuable experiences with respect to public participation in flood risk management. An early involvement of stakeholders and citizens in discussions and decision making will most probably pay off in acceptance and implementation, compensating (potential) initial efficiency loss.

Keywords

Flood risk perception, public participation, local knowledge