



Policy recommendations for the EU level: **Supporting participation in adaptive river basin management**

Key messages

- Adaptation policies should be designed, implemented, monitored and evaluated through participatory processes embedded across all instruments of European policy and related sectors. These processes must go well beyond currently dominant stakeholder consultations.
- Evidence-based and shared understanding of climate change related threats and drivers is essential for participatory adaptation processes. The BeWater approach achieves this through extensive science-society dialogues build around participatory modelling and narrative development.
- Well-designed participatory adaptation decision making processes are essential elements for strengthening stakeholder networks that facilitate successful implementation of adaptation measures.
- Nature-based solutions and social innovation are especially important in order to successfully tackle the immense and multifaceted challenge of global change. Accordingly, these should be given strong support in European policy, research and financial instrument design and decision-making processes. implementation of adaptation measures.

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Introduction

The participation of stakeholders is widely considered to enhance the degree of acceptance for environmental policy measures, including in the field of water management (e.g. Kochskämper et al. 2016, European Commission 2003). Several European Directives make public participation a prerequisite for successful implementation.

In the frame of compliance with the Water Framework Directive, the involvement of a variety of stakeholders is crucial to address the prevailing obstacles to achieving good environmental status, i.e. diffuse nutrient pollution from agriculture, flow (hydrological) regulations, and physical (morphological) alterations (European Commission 2015). Integrating climate change adaptation into water management discussions further underlines the need for stakeholder and societal participation, given the transdisciplinarity and cross-sectoral nature of the topic.

In addition to increasing the acceptance of measures, public participation is a tool to facilitate mutual learning for the public and decision-makers, thereby leading to more informed decision-making (e.g. Pahl-Wostl 2007, Gain et al. 2013). In settings with high uncertainty and variability, such as regarding adaptation to climate change, the involvement of stakeholders can be a way to reach more flexible and adaptive decisions. Currently, the aspect of participation and integration of climate change adaptation considerations are not yet exhaustively exploited in the various stages of river basin management planning (European Commission 2009).

The BeWater project, supported by the European Commission's 7th Framework Programme, serves as a means for bringing together science and society in river basin management planning, while responding to the currently insufficient integration of climate change in such activities.

The approach elaborated in the project moves away from the traditional top-down expert-dominated approaches to adaptation planning and instead integrates stakeholders in the process to facilitate the co-development of River Basin Adaptation Plans by local actors, relevant stakeholders, researchers and experts. The approach was tested in four Mediterranean river basins in Spain, Slovenia, Cyprus and Tunisia, each with diverse climate, land use, political, cultural and socio-economic conditions. The approach has resulted in four Plans, which contain a number of measures for adaptive water resources management.



Photo: McKenna Davis

European Commission (2003). Public Participation in relation to the Water Framework Directive. Guidance document no. 8.

European Commission (2009). River basin management in a changing climate. Guidance document No. 24.

European Commission (2015). The Water Framework Directive and the Floods Directive: Actions towards the 'good status' of EU water and to reduce flood risks. Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament and the Council.

Gain et al. (2013). Can integrated water resources management increase adaptive capacity to climate change adaptation? A critical review. *Journal of Water Resource and Protection* 5: 11-20.

Kochskämper et al. (2016). Participation for effective environmental governance? Evidence from Water Framework Directive implementation in Germany, Spain and the United Kingdom. *Journal of Environmental Management* 181: 737-748.

Pahl-Wostl (2007). Transitions towards adaptive management of water facing climate and global change. *Water Resource Management* 21: 49-62.

2 The BeWater participatory approach

Noting the complexity of developing River Basin Adaptation Plans, the BeWater project used a flexible methodological framework with a robust analytical approach. A further key component was the strong focus on society as a whole through awareness campaigns and the integration and engagement of stakeholders in the process to foster mutual learning. Interactive workshops, interviews, and validation processes were utilised to involve stakeholders in identifying the respective challenges for water management in their basins. The participatory events also enabled the development and evaluation of measures to tackle the identified challenges. The steps and the corresponding methods applied are illustrated in Figure 1.

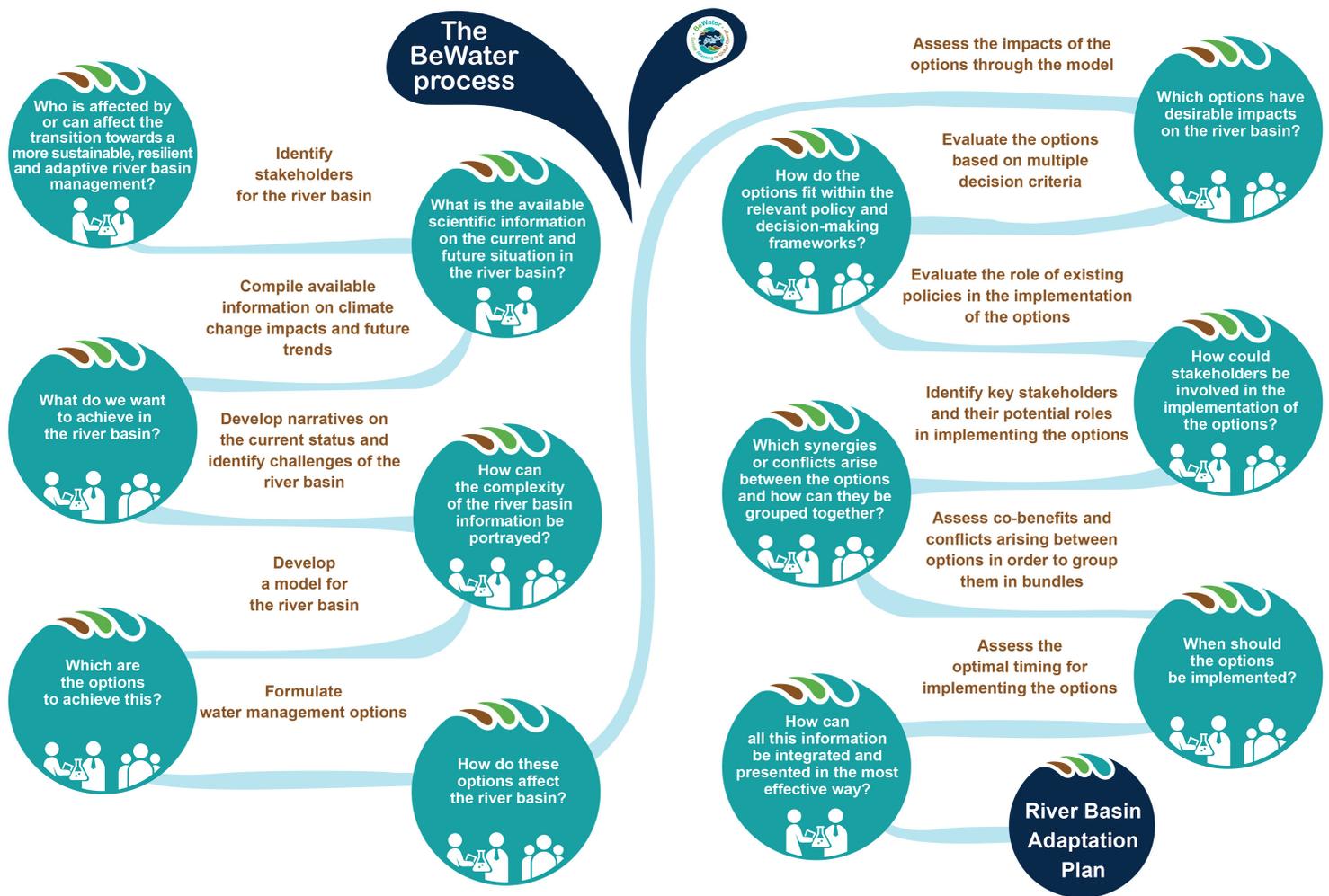


Figure 1. The BeWater participatory approach to developing river basin adaptation plans

The process has proven to be able to deliver results with a high degree of social acceptance, political relevance and technical interest to tackle the uncertainties and complex nature of climate change in the targeted basins. The established participatory approach and experiences can serve as a starting point for other river basins wishing to plan for climate change adaptation, as well as for the integration of stakeholders in participatory processes for environmental decision-making more broadly.

3 Recommendations for EU level action

- Stakeholder participation in policy design is widely recognised as a factor that contributes to successful implementation of river basin management measures. However, the potential of participatory processes is yet not fully realised in developing and implementing climate change adaptation actions.
- Adaptation policies should be designed, implemented, evaluated and monitored through participatory processes integrated into all instruments of European policy and related sectors. These processes must go well beyond the currently dominant stakeholder consultations.
- Given that an evidence-based and shared understanding of climate change related threats and their drivers is an essential starting point for participatory adaptation decision-making processes, the information provided by pilot cases developed through science-society dialogues should be more strongly integrated in overarching policy design. Moreover, society should be invited to contribute to the creation of new knowledge – for example through citizen-science schemes - to broaden the evidence base.
- The upcoming revisions of the EU Adaptation Strategy, the implementation tools of the Water Framework Directive and the Floods Directive must acknowledge the urgency of climate change adaptation and should place a strong focus in participatory planning processes and co-developed solutions that will increase social and ecological resilience.
- In order to do so, available resources that draw on experiences in participatory planning should be reviewed and highlighted so as to encourage their application within adaptation planning and in regional adaptation action across Member States. Knowledge sharing must be promoted at all levels, leveraging the potential of platforms such as ClimateAdapt, RegionsAdapt, WISE-RTD or Panorama Platform and transferring lessons learned from research and science in society efforts (for example BeWater).
- In addition, strengthened information from the local/regional level up to the national and European institutions will facilitate the upscaling of lessons learned from adaptation planning experiences. This could entail, for example, the inclusion of local/regional actors in national planning committees or policy development processes, or fostering exchanges between adaptation networks operating at different levels (e.g. cities with regional and EU networks).
- Nature-based solutions and social innovation are central to successfully tackling the immense and multifaceted challenges presented by global change. Accordingly, these should be given strong support in European policy, research, and financial instrument design and decision-making processes.
- European financing instruments such as LIFE+, the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development, the Structural and Cohesion Funds, and Horizon 2020 should focus more strongly on mainstreaming participation within adaptation planning in water and other sectors. This can be accomplished via the inclusion of standards or criteria for strong participation as a prerequisite for financing eligibility.

