



Effects of stakeholder involvement in river management

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In the last decades, in many parts of Europe involving local stakeholders or the local public in river management has become a standard procedure. For many decision makers, the purpose of involving other interest groups is limited to achieving a sufficient local acceptance of the project, and accordingly they adopt minimal forms of involvement. Theoretical literature and first empirical studies, however, suggest that stakeholder involvement can have, if done in appropriate quality, have much more far-reaching benefits for a sustainable river management such as a better consensus, social learning and social capital building. But there is so far only little reliable evidence that and under which conditions such benefits or effects in fact result from stakeholder involvement processes. The reason for this is that such involvement processes represent very complex social interventions, and all "affordable" effect measurement methods have their weaknesses. In our project we wanted to find out which were the really robust social effects of stakeholder involvement in river management. We therefore evaluated a number of real Swiss case studies of participatory river management using three different approaches of effect measurements: a quasi-experimental approach using repeated standardized measurement of stakeholders' attitudes, a qualitative long-term ex-post measurement approach based on interviews with stakeholders of five participatory river projects, and a comparative analysis approach based on data of residents effect assessments of participatory river planning gathered in a Swiss national survey.

The analysis of all three evaluation studies confirmed that stakeholder involvement in river management projects have substantive social effects. The comparison of the results of the three measurement approaches revealed that social learning and acceptance building were the most robust effects of stakeholder involvement, as they were confirmed by all the three measurement approaches. Social capital building, however, was not found to be a relevant effect in the long-term qualitative ex-post measurement of stakeholder processes in river management. The data suggested that social capital was "only" maintained or reproduced by the involvement process. The results will be discussed, and implications for the practice as well as for future research will be drawn.