



An evaluation of public participation in UK river basin management planning

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The EU Water Framework Directive is reshaping multi-level environmental governance structures in many Member States. One area where re-structuring should be highly visible is in regards to public participation in water management. The Directive legally mandates that implementing agencies should make information publicly available relating to river basin management planning, include the public in the planning process and encourage the active involvement of 'interested parties' both during and after the planning stage. Yet critical questions arise over the extent to which these requirements have actually been met in Member States and the outcomes of participatory processes on the ground. In this study, public participation was evaluated in England and Wales by conducting: a) a broad based quantitative survey of the implementation strategy undertaken across all 11 River Basin Districts (RBDs); and, b) an in-depth analysis of the Anglian RBD drawing on theoretical notions of social learning; a critical measure of participatory processes. Results from the survey showed all RBDs complied with the minimum regulatory requirements on public access to information and written consultation, and even went further with provisions for oral consultation and stakeholder engagement. But the focus was clearly on stakeholder groups with little public involvement beyond minimal legally mandated requirements. Analysis of case study data provided some evidence of social learning at every level (instrumental, communicative and transformative) and beyond the individual scale (wider community and organisational learning). Learning was however significantly limited by participant's high level of expertise and environmental awareness. Also apparent was the influence of other factors, operating at various institutional scales, in shaping learning. The paper then speculates on the implications of the findings for both future research and policy, particularly in light of the European Commission's upcoming review of EU water policy.