



Stakeholders and public involvement in river management: heterogeneous acceptance of participatory processes among Swiss institutions.

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This research explores participatory processes in the domain of river management in Switzerland. The main objective is to better understand how participatory processes are incorporated into river management practice. Switzerland being a federal state, river management is a cantonal (regional) responsibility, under the supervision (and co-funding) of the State (a Confederation). The federal funding includes the opportunity to fund additional participatory activities to aid river management, not least because the federal authorities consider the involvement of wider stakeholders and the public in decision-making as a means of aiding the progression of projects. This is a particularly important goal in a Swiss setting where direct democracy (the possibility of calling the decision of any level of government into question through a popular vote) means that a reasonable level of project acceptance is a necessary element of project progression.

River management in Switzerland now includes both flood protection and river restoration objectives, which has served to increase its controversy: river corridors contain competing interests with different objectives (e.g. ecological enhancement, protection of agricultural land, flood risk reduction). We were asked by the Confederation to evaluate participatory processes it sponsored and one element of this evaluation aimed to develop a typology of stakeholder participation. We conducted interviews with the 26 cantonal officers in charge of river management. These interviews were based upon thematically structured open ended questions, with the responses analyzed qualitatively.

We have identified significant divergence in the implementation of participatory processes between the cantons. These appear to be related to two factors: (1) the canton's historical experience of river management; and (2) the methods used to select stakeholders for inclusion in the decisional process. Cantons that refer to guidelines or pre-established handbooks for the selection of stakeholders often conduct instrumental participation, limited to information dissemination. On the other hand, in some cantons participatory processes characterized by normative rationales take place. Here the goals of participatory processes are not limited to outcomes (e.g. acceptance of the project), but value the process of participation in itself. In these cantons actors are selected via social connections and the claimed 'common sense' of cantonal project officers. Here, the opportunity of public debate opens up, the inclusion of actors often start earlier in the decision-making processes and objectives are defined publicly and collectively. Cantonal authorities involved in river management do not all consider participatory processes as important. The acknowledgment of participatory processes is less related to an authority's recognition of the importance of participation and more to specific local experience.