

The role of stakeholder engagement in the making of the Austrian National Adaptation Strategy: Lessons learned

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Up to now, 12 European countries have provided a framework for climate change adaptation by adopting National Adaptation Strategies (NAS), while others, including Austria are still in the process of developing a NAS. In most countries, the “traditional” top-down approach of policy making was (or is) supplemented by participatory elements. It is widely acknowledged that stakeholder engagement is particularly needed in policy issues that are characterized by high levels of uncertainties and complexities such as climate change and adaptation (Gibbons, 1999, Pahl-Wostl 2002, Parkins & Mitchell 2005, Klopogge & van der Sluijs 2006, Santos et al. 2006, van de Kerkhof 2006, Carnex et al., 2009, Reed 2008). Thus, joint up actions, exchange of knowledge and expertise and learning from each other are therefore – among others - crucial issues to solve complex and uncertain problems (Brown & Harvey 2009).

We intend to present lessons learned gathered from the Austrian approach to engage stakeholders in the elaboration of the NAS against a set of criteria derived from stakeholder theory and adaptation policy planning. In particular, contribution of stakeholder engagement shall be discussed with a view to build adaptive capacity through developing awareness, to enhance the acceptance for the strategy, to reduce sources of conflict, etc.

In Austria, the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry, Environment and Water Management has announced to develop a NAS in close cooperation with all concerned stakeholders in 2007. The strategy will create a national framework to ensure coordination and harmonization of the various climate change adaptation activities in all relevant areas. The final strategy can be expected in the beginning of the 2012.

The making of the Austrian NAS has been accompanied from various stakeholders from the field of science and government as well as from societal stakeholders (e.g. interest groups, NGOs, members of the public). Nevertheless, the level of engagement and stakeholders “power” show significant differences. In 2008, as one of the main element in stakeholder engagement in Austria, a participatory process started which addresses the “organized public” and the “general public”. For the “organized public” the process aims to offer active involvement to all stakeholders affected by the impacts of climate change in their fields of responsibility. 106 different institutions, mainly federal and provincial ministries, interest groups and NGOs committed themselves to take an active part in shaping the strategy. Furthermore, to provide information and raise awareness for the “general public” a web site on climate change impacts and adaptation in Austria has been created. Via this web site a participatory process was initiated to include the broad public in the elaboration of the strategy. The goal of this internet-participation was to obtain proposals and arrange them according to priority and relevance at an early stage in the discussion process about the national adaptation strategy. The interest in participating in the Austrian adaptation strategy process was considerable: between August and November 2009 1,162 persons used this opportunity to give their inputs and opinions concerning climate change adaptation.

Although inclusive governance has become an essential ingredient in public environmental policy making, disillusionment has grown amongst practitioners who felt that the benefits have not been realized (Reed 2008, Brown et al. 2002, Few et al., 2006). We aim at reflecting the Austrian experiences with scientific work in the field of stakeholder engagement. Thus, we will conclude with the discussion of the implication of stakeholder engagement and try to answer the question if it was a “substantial contribution” or more of a “hollow promise”.

The results are based on desk research and qualitative interviews with actors involved in the making of the NAS and responsible for the design/accomplishment of stakeholder engagement elements.