

PLANNING AND EVALUATING PARTICIPATORY FLOOD RISK MANAGEMENT

CONCEPT AND EMPIRICAL FINDINGS

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INTRODUCTION

To influence and change risk perception and real decision-making regarding flood risk was the overarching aim of the ERA-Net CRUE project IMRA (Integrative flood risk governance approach for improvement of risk awareness). To reach this goal the project partners tested – additionally to common methods – two completely new approaches for dealing with risk perception and risk communication for flood risk management:

- a new indicator based model for the assessment of stakeholder cooperation and the institutional framework of this cooperation,
- the concept of social milieus to ensure a tailor-made participation campaign.

The indicator based model is a benchmarking and monitoring tool in order to evaluate the performance of a flood risk management system in regard to ideal risk governance principles.

The concept of social milieus was used to gain a picture of the people living in the test case regions. The concept was included in the flood risk activities, to learn more about lifestyles, attitudes and values and to use this knowledge to plan the information and participation activities for the broad public. To test the conceptual framework three different river basins in Germany, Austria and Italy were integrated into the project as case studies.

THE INDICATOR BASED MODEL

The vulnerability of societies in general can be distinguished into different dimensions such as social, economic or ecological vulnerability but also institutional vulnerability. The institutional vulnerability can be seen as one of the main framework conditions in dealing with risks because the whole risk cycle from mitigation, preparedness, response to recovery is embedded in an institutional system.

The aspect of institutional vulnerability can in principle be understood as lack of ability to involve all relevant stakeholders and effectively co-ordinate them right from the beginning of the decision-making process and according to risk communication processes. It refers both to organisational form and function as well as to guiding legal and cultural rules.

In a former project (MIDIR – Multidimensional integrated risk governance) a set of a core principles of and prerequisites for successful multidimensional and integrative risk governance has been developed. Within the IMRA project the responsible water administrations used this approach twice to assess and monitor the performance of the existing management systems in terms of attention paid to risk governance principles. The assessment and monitoring concept – and especially the indicator system – is composed of two parts:

- Part A: Procedural and methodological aspects, applicable for every risk setting.

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- Part B: Context related aspects, to be defined individually for every risk setting. For this phase it is necessary to develop additional indicators by the responsible authorities according to their needs, circumstances, priority risks, population, target groups etc. During the work in the case study regions the indicators are adopted according to the requirements of the responsible institutions and circumstances.

The performance of the institutional risk governance process is illustrated similar to a balanced scorecard. It has an internal function by showing how well an institution performs in this respect but also an external function to show to the public and other decision-makers to which extent steps and measures for risk governance have already been implemented.

The indicator system was an important outcome of the IMRA project, since monitoring and evaluation of governance processes is relevant for a learning process towards recreating trust in public decision-making.

SOCIAL MILIEUS AS A TOOL FOR COMMUNICATION WITH THE PUBLIC

Risk perception is affected by attitudes and values – values filter information and colour perceptions. To plan a risk communication strategy it is necessary

- to find out what the status of knowledge and risk perception of the local population is,
- to find out which values and attitudes can affect risk perception the target groups have.

Attitudes, values and other socio-cultural features can be assigned to social groups, to “milieus”. Research on social milieus is traditionally performed by market research and psychology. It was not foreseen or possible within the IMRA project to perform a detailed socio-cultural analysis of the target groups in the regions of the subprojects. But an overview on the national level which kind of target groups do exist, what their attitude and values are and what kind of information material might reach them can give valuable input to a risk communication strategy.

The social milieus described above are not just a theoretic exercise but were used to design tailor-made communication strategies in the case study areas. Social milieus can act as a means to discuss how to reach local target groups in the case study areas. e.g. in the Austrian case study in the valley of the River Möll in Carinthia, the project team used statistical data about formal education, age, income, employment rate, sectors of employment as well as the results of the last elections. This data was discussed with the mayor and local stakeholders, who had additional knowledge about the professions and education of the local population. According to these results information and participation activities were selected and designed. In the other two case studies different approaches to gain the data were chosen that will be compared among each other.

In all case study regions the mix of tools and approaches looked slightly different. E.g. the indicator based model had to be adapted to the institutional and legal backgrounds. But it was seen as a good means to structure and prioritise the discussion on risk governance fitness and take up issues that were previously not or not enough taken into consideration. The difference in the selected approaches had its basis not only in the results of the indicator based analysis but also in the social milieu approach that helped to understand that not all people can be reached with one communication means e.g. the same kind of flyer. Therefore number and design of participation activities varied. Barriers for the analysis of the social milieus were in all three case studies that detailed socio-demographic data was not available (for free) at small scale. The project team tried to complement the statistical information with additional research activities and interviews with key persons. The success of the chosen single information and participation activities was very heterogeneous, but activating stakeholders and intensive work and common decision making processes proved successful in all case study areas.

The experiences made with the practical applications were basis to design 12-step approach and to allocate appropriate methods of risk communication and participation to these steps which are now described in a handbook for flood risk practitioners.

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