

# Regional Water Policy Participation: Dealing with the awareness gap

In partnership with the OECD Studies on Water: Stakeholder Engagement for Inclusive Water Governance

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**Organisation:** Hoogheemraadschap van Rijnland

**Country:** Netherlands

**Level of government:** Central government

**Sector:** Environmental protection

**Type:** Communication

**Launched in:** 2013

**Overall development time:** 9 month(s)

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# Description

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The regional water authority of Rijnland designed a new working programme and policy plan for 2015-2021 jointly with stakeholders, including citizens, in order to get a better sense of how much the public knows about water issues, to fill-in their existing knowledge gaps of the water authorities that they elect, and to motivate a cultural shift across stakeholders - particularly the public.

A survey was carried out specifically targeting citizens to assess their knowledge on water, their positions regarding certain water issues, and their willingness to participate further in decision-making. Results were used to set up an online participation platform to familiarise people with the roles and responsibilities of the regional water authorities, facilitate discussion on important issues, and encourage new ideas.

A large congress took place in June 2014 and gathered citizens as well as other stakeholders (e.g. environmental organisations, municipalities, etc.). The outcomes are currently being considered for inclusion in the draft policy plan.

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## Why the innovation was developed

- In the Netherlands, Dutch citizens face a critical awareness gap, taking current levels of safety for granted.
  - This is explained by a high degree of trust in public authorities and the absence of a major flood disaster in the last 60 years (in a country that has 60% of its territory in floodable areas, of which a considerable part is below sea level).
  - A symptom of this is the low voting turnout for the elections of Dutch water authorities every four years. Citizens have to elect officials of regional water authorities in charge of managing water, including for flood defence, while being unaware of their practical duties and roles.
  - The resulting low participation levels during elections calls into question the legitimacy of elected officials.
  - To make better policies together with Rijnland stakeholders to tackle all of the problems facing the water authority.
  - Reduce the awareness gap of citizens in the Netherlands by educating and informing them on important issues regarding water.
  - Increase legitimacy of the organisations that manage water issues in the eyes of citizens.
  - Experiment with new forms of participation (ie. online).
  - Implement a policy plan that is closer to our stakeholders' interests than previous plans.
  - Increase knowledge of Rijnland as an organisation and water-related issues in general for the public.
  - Create a cultural shift within Rijnland to consult external stakeholder earlier in the process.
- Municipalities
  - Water institutions at sub-national level (river basin organisations, state agencies, regional water authorities)
  - Agricultural organisations
  - Fishery Organisations
  - Environmental Organisations
  - Service providers
  - Regulators (economic, environmental)

# Results

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## Results not available yet

- Conclusions have not yet been reached at this time on all of the expected outcomes, with the process resulting in both expected and unexpected outcomes.
- The talks with stakeholders confirmed the most relevant issues that need a solution. Rijnland already started a process of stakeholder engagement in 2008, and this proved effective because it proved easy to get relevant information from important stakeholders within a short time period (2 months). The content generated by the participants of the platform was of high quality and more applicable than anticipated. The participants, however, were not a representative sample of Rijnland.
- The overall experience has been beneficial so far, with the tools of the campaign (cartoons) that can be used for other purposes.
- The stakeholder engagement process has already generated useful ideas and content, and energy within the organisation to look more outward, instead of inward. The process can be seen as a driving force to change the work culture within Rijnland.
- The engagement process and specifically the conference was good for the image of Rijnland with its stakeholders. It also raises their level of expectation that Rijnland will behave accordingly in all its dealings.
- The program also generated experience with using a web-based platform and social media to do stakeholder participation.

# Development

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## Design

The process was initiated by both the Dijkgraaf (head of the council) and Director (head of management) in advance of the Water Board elections set for March 2015. It was made clear to the stakeholders that the level of participation (by consultation) was low on the participation ladder. An engagement process called "Denk mee met Rijnland" (Think along with us) began with a survey that was given to stakeholders to establish their interest and motivations, and to understand the most important issues to them that could be distilled in future policy processes.

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## Testing

- No methods were used to test the innovation.
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## Implementation

### Tools used:

- Representative survey: To give a representative picture on the relevant issues and motivations of the general public.
- Cartoons: Visualisations of the information is more accessible for the general public. Creating a script for a cartoon also forces one to make the information more accessible. Three videos were made: one cartoon explaining the workings of Rijnland and water related issues (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-kLn2llmcqs>), and two cartoons with more in-depth information on several issues and dilemmas with the invitation to participate (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=34OWOdmnNWk>, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kmNGH47TktI>).
- Campaign: A traditional media campaign was initiated to raise awareness of the participation platform. This was done by ads and press releases during the time period the platform was open. Facebook and Twitter were also used in this campaign.
- Web-based participation platform requiring a login: Accessible to the general public, an explanation of relevant issues was made possible through the cartoons on the platform, and possibilities for follow-up with stakeholders was established.
- Facebook and Twitter: Social media made the information easily accessible for the general public and allowed for direct interaction. An explanation of relevant issues was also made possible through the use of social media.
- Workshop: Four questions were posed to the stakeholders at a workshop event, which helped to engage existing contacts and broaden perspectives: 1. What are the consequences of climate change (sea level rise, more rain in short periods etc.) for your organisation? 2. Which water related issues are relevant for your organisation and what are the actions you take to tackle them? 3. How do you see the cooperation with Rijnland on these issues? 4. Which issues should have more attention from Rijnland in the future?
- Conference: The event brought all of the stakeholders together in one location, and made a discussion of the issues possible.

### Resources used:

- Rijnland financed the entire process from it's own budget, which originates from taxation. This is controlled by the council of Rijnland (verenigde vergadering).
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## Challenges and solutions

- Conception and design: The general public is difficult to reach. They have valuable information and ideas, but also lack certain knowledge. If there is an awareness gap, it can be difficult to facilitate participation.
- This engagement process first created a representative overview of existing knowledge and interests, and then tried to get the general public to participate afterwards which proved difficult.
- Development and deliberation: It was difficult to explain the issues and dilemmas regarding water to the general public, and one of the reasons why the cartoons were developed, but which were done under great time pressure.
- Implementation and operation: The implementation of the online platform (from an external company) within the organisational website and layout proved to be more difficult than expected. By using a web based platform with a login, we mainly reached the more informed and dedicated civilians. Responses on open platforms through social media were more diverse.
- Evaluation and monitoring: The campaign used did not result in the participation of many new stakeholders. The responses from many of the participants reflect that they had prior knowledge of water and water-related issues. Overall, there seemed to be a low level of interest or motivation from the general public.

# Lessons Learned

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## Lessons Learned

- A representative survey provides useful data, which proved to be a good basis on how representative the online participation platforms are.
  - Stakeholder engagement with the general public consisted of two elements: explanation and participation. Social media was effective for this kind of engagement, with Twitter attracting both the general public and more informed participants. Facebook engagement consisted mainly of the general public. The quality of responses and moderation have to be taken into account when utilising social media.
  - Engagement that targets different stakeholders separately generates more knowledge of the issues and interests of each stakeholder. The workshops with separate stakeholders were used for this purpose.
  - To make clear that the issues have a diverse set of interests and stakeholders, it is advisable to facilitate a discussion amongst the stakeholders. The goal of this type of setting is not necessarily to get a solution, but to make stakeholders aware of the relevant playing field. The conference with all participants was used for this purpose.
  - It takes more than putting several stakeholders in one room to enable a productive conversation on shared interests and goals. It is easier to talk from one's own perspective. The conference tried to facilitate the right kinds of conversations.
  - An engagement process on a certain issue affects the expectations of stakeholders on the possibilities of engagement and behaviour on all issues.
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## Conditions for success

- Hiring professionals for certain aspects of engagement is necessary if you don't have the knowledge in-house.
  - The leaders within the organisation have to embrace the engagement process in order to overcome organisational bottlenecks, and to make implementation of the results of the engagement process possible.
  - Existing account and stakeholder management is a big enabling factor because relevant contacts are known and an existing relationship with knowledge of interests etc. is a good ground for stakeholder engagement.
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## Other information

The awareness gap is difficult to overcome. If one does not want to listen, the way the story is told does not matter. The media campaign, including social media, was used to create awareness of the platform. This generated some awareness, but whether this will last is difficult to say at this point. The problem remains that there is always a dual goal: one has to explain and inform the public before meaningful participation can take place. This is asking a lot of a public that does not have a clear perception of the problem and how or whether it affects them. Therefore, motivation to participate is an issue. To tackle this, a financial incentive was discussed but later discarded. The participation platform had only one incentive: the idea that was deemed the best by Rijnland's specialists would win a pair of rubber boots. The cartoons were used to explain issues, and they received positive feedback. The creation took more than anticipated, however. The resulting problems for certain colleagues (time allocated for other activities) were discussed and this resulted in more available time.