

Public Participation in Climate Change Adaptation and Decision-Making Processes

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Key messages:

- To obtain and maintain effective public participation in climate adaptation and decision-making processes, **training and capacity building, national policies and the law, multiple communication channels, and platforms for engagement** should be considered.
- There are many existing international, national, and regional processes, laws, and policies that advocate for public engagement and provide guidelines for their implementation including the **Rio Declaration**, the **Aarhus Convention**, and the **National Adaptation Plans**.
- Climate change adaptation and decision-making processes should focus on enhancing the main levels of public participation processes: **access to information, consultation, and active involvement**.
- The suitability of the wide-ranging public participation tools in climate change adaptation and decision-making processes should be selected based on the evaluation and indication criteria of the core elements of **breadth, depth, and outcomes** of the selected public participation tools.

Public participation has been advocated as an important element in all levels of climate action including adaptation. Public engagement is the process where an institution interacts with interested or affected individuals, groups, associations, organisations, or government entities before making a decision or implementing an activity.¹

Public participation is important as a principal of democratic governance, a method of obtaining effective contribution, and a knowledge sourcing and distribution mechanism. In the climate change adaptation context, public participation ensures that specific interventions are made with the understanding and consent of all interested and affected groups. This helps to reduce misunderstandings by creating a process to

communicate and consult so that polarisation of groups during conflicts can be avoided.²

The main levels of the public participation process are identified as:

- **Access to information:** where governments or any other entities responsible for the intervention ensure that the public has access to all relevant information and documents in an acceptable manner
- **Consultation:** where the responsible entity invites the public to provide input and give their opinion on draft plans, documents, and processes
- **Active involvement:** where the relevant sectors of the public share responsibility in all stages of decision-making including conceptualising, designing, and planning

¹ InforMEA. 2020. *Public Participation*. Online: InforMEA. Available at <https://www.informea.org/en/terms/public-participation>.

² Ibid.

and implementing a specific adaptation action.³

These steps of participation are elaborated below with the respective underlying goals at each stage.⁴ In relation to public participation goals, the public should be provided with enough information to understand the context of the project or programme, feedback should be obtained from the public relating to decisions and alternative options, the public could be involved as a partner so that they can take responsibility for certain actions and are involved in decision-making processes, and involved insofar as to allow the public to take responsibility to drive entire processes.

In relation to promises made to the public, they should be kept informed, be heard, their concerns acknowledged, involved so that their concerns and aspirations are reflected in certain actions, their advice and innovation in formulating solutions considered, and to implement the public's contribution.

It is also important to identify the relevant groups that represent the public at each level of action.⁵ At the local level, the actors involved include local governments, community-based organisations, individuals, households, vulnerable groups, and the private sector. They focus on needs, aspirations, and culture through projects and activities.

At the national level, the actors involved include ministries and other government agencies, international non-governmental Organisations (INGOs), national-level non-governmental

organisations (NGOS) and civil society organisations (CSOs), community-based organisations (CBOs), local government, research institutions, academia, and the private sector. They focus on development goals, sectoral objectives, and the country visions through policies, strategies, legislation, and financial resources.

At the international level, the actors involved include national governments, multilateral agencies, think tank, research institutions, academia, and INGOs that focus on global goals through principles, commitments, and financial resources.

Existing Laws and Processes

Many international laws, policies, and processes advocate for active public engagement and provide guidelines on their implementation methodology. Developed in 1992 at the UN Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED), Principle 10 of the Rio Declaration includes explicit goals of citizen participation and engagement in climate actions. States were given a special responsibility to facilitate these by ensuring access to information and opportunities to participate in decision-making processes. Since then, the need for public participation has been prominently featured in calls to climate action. Principle 10 sets out three fundamental rights: access to information, public participation, and justice. "Access rights" promote transparent, inclusive, and accountable environmental governance. Access to information empowers citizens and incentivises them to participate in

³ European Urban Knowledge Network. 2020. *What is Public Participation?* Online: European Urban Knowledge Network. Available at <https://www.eukn.eu/policy-labs/policy-lab-for-cy-public-participation-in-the-development-process/general-introduction/what-is-public-participation/>

⁴ Wouters M, Hardie-Boys N and Wilson C. 2008. *Evaluating public input in National Park Management Plan: Facilitators and barriers to meaningful participation in statutory processes*. Wellington: Science for Conservation 308. Available at:

<https://www.doc.govt.nz/Documents/science-and-technical/sfc308entire.pdf>

⁵ UNESCO and UNFCCC. 2016. *Action for Climate Empowerment: Guidelines for accelerating solutions through education, training and public awareness*. Bonn: UNESCO. Available at

https://unfccc.int/files/cooperation_and_support/education_and_outreach/application/pdf/action_for_climate_empowerment_guidelines.pdf

decision- and policy-making processes in an informed manner. Public participation is becoming a vital part of addressing environmental problems and achieving sustainable development by encouraging governments to adopt policies and enact laws that take community needs into account. Access to justice provides the foundation for “access rights” because it facilitates the public’s ability to enforce their right to participate, be informed, and to hold regulators and polluters accountable for environmental damage.⁶

In 2010, governments adopted the Guidelines for the Development of National Legislation on Access to Information, Public Participation and Access to Justice in Environmental Matters (the Bali Guidelines) at the 11th Special Session of UNEP’s Governing Council/ Global Ministerial Environmental Forum.⁷ The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development focuses on decision-making with particular reference to participation of vulnerable groups, such as women (SDG target 5.5), developing countries, including African countries, least developed countries, land-locked developing countries, small-island developing States, and middle-income countries (SDG target 10.6) to the decision-making process. Furthermore, SDG target 16.7 aims to “ensure responsive, inclusive, participatory and

representative decision-making at all levels”. In paragraph 48, the 2030 Agenda also highlights the importance having indicators for decision-making.⁸

The Basel Convention on the Control of Transboundary Movements of Hazardous Wastes and their Disposal was adopted in 1989 and entered into force in 1992. Public participation is a core principle of the Basel Declaration on Environmentally Sound Management and many other international agreements. Public participation, as referred to in section IV.K, may be addressed in legislation or policy.⁹

The Joint Principles for Adaptation are a statement by civil society organisations from across the world on what they consider to be a benchmark for good adaptation planning and implementation. They are a tool for ensuring that national policies and plans meet the needs and fulfil the rights of the most vulnerable people to adapt to climate change.¹⁰

According to the above guidelines, donor agencies and mechanisms such as the Green Climate Fund, Adaptation Fund, Global Environment Fund, and the World Bank require project proponents to integrate stakeholder consultations and public participation processes from the proposal submission to the

⁶ UN Environment Programme. 2016. *UNEP Implementing Principle 10 of the Rio Declaration*. Online: UN Environment Programme. Available at <https://www.unenvironment.org/news-and-stories/story/unep-implementing-principle-10-rio-declaration>; Ochieng B. 2015. *Implementing Principle 10 and the Bali Guidelines in Africa: Issue Paper to Support UNEP and Other Stakeholders*. Online: UNEP. Available at: <https://wedocs.unep.org/bitstream/handle/20.500.11822/13890/Issue%20Paper%20on%20P10%20and%20Bali%20Guidelines%20in%20Africa.pdf>

⁷ Ochieng B. 2015. *Implementing Principle 10 and the Bali Guidelines in Africa: Issue Paper to Support UNEP and Other Stakeholders*. Online: UNEP. Available at: <https://wedocs.unep.org/bitstream/handle/20.500.11822/13890/Issue%20Paper%20on%20P10%20and%20Bali%20Guidelines%20in%20Africa.pdf>

⁸ Sustainable Development Goals Knowledge Platform. 2020. *Integration for Integrated Decision-Making & Participation*. Online: Sustainable Development Goals Knowledge Platform. Available at <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/topics/information-integrated-decision-making-and-participation>

⁹ UNEP. 2005. *Basel Convention Technical Guidelines: General Technical Guidelines for the Environmentally Sound Management of Wastes Consisting of, Containing or Contaminated with Persistent Organic Pollutants (POPs)*. Basel: UNEP. Available at http://archive.basel.int/pub/techguid/pop_guid_final.pdf

¹⁰ Southern Voices on Adaptation. 2014. *Joint Principles for Adaptation: A civil society initiative to promote effective and equitable adaptation to climate change*. Online: Southern Voices on Adaptation. Available at https://www4.unfccc.int/sites/NAPC/Documents%20NAP/Suplements/Joint_Principles_for_Adaptation.pdf

Box #1

Blue Carbon Ecosystems: Climate Change, Vulnerable Communities, and Mangrove Ecosystem Conservation and Restoration in Sri Lanka

SLYCAN Trust is a non-for-profit think tank which is implementing a mangrove restoration programme in Sri Lanka supported by the mandated government entities and the private sector. The restoration programmes were planned with CBOs in selected areas, youth groups were consulted and trained to conduct awareness creation sessions, and the community organisations have taken up responsibility to maintain restored locations with the support of government entities.

Source(s): Rodrigo D. 2020. *Blue Carbon Ecosystems: Climate Change, Vulnerable Communities, and Mangroves in Sri Lanka*. Online: SLYCAN Trust. Available at <https://slycantrust.org/blog-posts-knowledge/blue-carbon-ecosystems-climate-change-vulnerable-communities-and-mangroves-in-sri-lanka>

implementation stage. These processes also facilitate Online Participation Tools (OPTs) through their web portals.¹¹

At the regional level, the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe's Convention on Access to Information, Public Participation in Decision-making and Access to Justice in Environmental Matters (the Aarhus Convention) and the Kyiv Protocol on Pollutant Release and Transfer Registers (PRTRs) empowers people with the rights to access information, participate in decision-making in environmental matters, and to seek justice. They are the only legally binding global instruments on environmental democracy, and the protection afforded for environment and human rights help to respond to many global challenges ranging from climate change and the loss of biodiversity, air, and water pollution to poverty eradication and security.¹²

At a national level, the National Adaptation Plan process (NAP) enables Parties to formulate and implement national adaptation plans (NAPs) as a

means of identifying medium- and long-term adaptation needs and developing and implementing strategies and programmes to address those needs.¹³ The NAP process provides an opportunity to enhance public participation in climate change adaptation on the national as well as the local level.

Section 2 of the Nationally Determined Contribution (NDC) guidelines developed by the UN agencies makes specific reference to stakeholder engagement/consultation in the NDC process, enhancing public awareness, identifying roles and responsibilities, and mainstreaming climate change in national processes to secure active engagement and participation of the key stakeholders involved in the SDG process at different levels and/or sectors.¹⁴ Environmental Impact Assessments are based on national legislation, but they may contain internationally accepted processes and norms that are adopted

¹¹ The World Bank. 2020. *Citizen Engagement*. Online: The World Bank. Available at <https://www.worldbank.org/en/about/what-we-do/brief/citizen-engagement>; Global Environment Facility. 2015. *Guidelines for the Implementation of the Public Involvement Policy*. Freeport: Global Environment Facility. Available at https://www.thegef.org/sites/default/files/events/Public_Guidelines_1.pdf; Green Climate Fund. 2016. *Call for Public Inputs: Review of Observer Participation*. Online: Green Climate Fund. Available at

<https://www.greenclimate.fund/document/call-public-inputs-review-observer-participation>

¹² UNECE. 2020. *Public Participation*. Online: UNECE. Available at <http://www.unece.org/fr/env/pp/welcome.html>.

¹³ United Nation Climate Change. 2019. *National Adaptation Plans*. Online: United Nation Climate Change. Available at <https://unfccc.int/topics/adaptation-and-resilience/workstreams/national-adaptation-plans>.

¹⁴ INDC Support. 2017. *NDC Implementation Guidance*. Online: INDC Support. Available at <https://www.indcsupport.org/ndc-guidance>

by countries, with a specific focus on public participation.¹⁵

Tools and Forums

Information is mostly provided to the public in a one-way mode of communication instead of an interactive manner in which the public can provide feedback. While information is shared interactively, some public groups engage in the implementation of the action. The activities are designed and implemented with the involvement of relevant public stakeholders from the initial stage, and the public can influence decision-making. The public can also drive initiatives and decisions that are made by the public to be implemented by relevant entities.¹⁶

The suitability of the wide-ranging public participation tools should be selected based on the evaluation and indication criteria of the core elements listed below:

- **Breadth:** incorporate a wide range of public values to achieve representation, be available to all public interests to achieve accessibility, allow for new participants over time to achieve renewability, and protect participants' identities when necessary to achieve anonymity.
- **Depth:** foster a two-way flow of information to sustain healthy dialogue, be flexible in scope, provide opportunities for frank and open discussions to sustain effective deliberation, promote and make available in a clearly understandable form independent input from scientific and other value-based sources to achieve transparency and credibility, and promote positive personal and institutional relationships.

- **Outcomes:** influence the decision-making process to achieve relevance, improve the quality of decisions to achieve effectiveness, contribute to all participants' knowledge to sustain mutual learning, reward or provide incentives to sustain reciprocity, and ensure that outputs and outcomes are cost-effective relative to inputs to achieve cost-effectiveness.¹⁷

Governments or implementing bodies could share information and proposed adaptation actions via notices in public places, print/electronic media, or be made available in respective offices for the public to access. Surveys or focus group discussions have the capacity to obtain responses from the grassroots level. However, this is mostly a one-way mode of communication and is often limited to specific groups or individual, even if they are selected at random. Although individual meetings are limited in capacity to reach a sufficient portion of the public, when targeted at key individuals. It can be very useful in getting information and transferring key messages to communities and act as a useful tool at the local level.

Having national level policies advocating public participation is an essential tool since public participation is often viewed as time consuming and cumbersome. Policies and regulation can also help organisations to justify their allocation of resources for public participation processes. Transparent mechanisms to handle the public's grievances can serve as an effective initial step toward the integration of public participation, especially in circumstances where proactive public participation is low. Grievance managing processes can assist in the gradual engagement

¹⁵ Sadler B, McCabe M, Abaza H et al. *Environmental Impact Assessment Training Resource Manual*. Geneva: UNEP. Available at <https://www.sprep.org/att/IRC/eCOPIES/Global/217.pdf>

¹⁶ Krishnaswamy A. 2012. *Strategies and Tools for Effective Public Participation in Natural Resource Management*. Online: Journal of Ecosystems & Management. Available at <https://jem-online.org/index.php/jem/article/view/124>

¹⁷ Ibid

Box #2

Rotating Leadership of Major Groups – Commission for Sustainable Development

The involvement of civil society organisations and groups in the CSD (Commission for Sustainable Development) is managed through the 9 major groups of Agenda 21 (women, children and youth, indigenous people, NGOs, local authorities, trade unions, business and industry, scientific and technological community, farmers). Participation rights for civil society groups and organisations include speaking slots, seats in round tables with ministers, the right to comment on the agenda, and the right to nominate people from that group. A key challenge is the need for each major group to be self-organised. Ideally, this should be democratic, through the election of key representatives. However, issues of representativeness may arise. To encourage dynamism, the “women” major group now has a rotating system in place so that every two years another NGO or group of NGOs will take the lead in accordance with the issues of that CSD cycle.

Source(s): UNECE. 2020. *Case Studies on Promoting PPIF at the International Level: Rotating Leadership of Major Groups – CSD*. Online: UNECE. Available at <https://www.unece.org/env/pp/ppif.compendium.html>.

of the public over the course of certain projects and programmes.

Creating physical and online national, regional, and international platforms where Civil Society Organisations (CSOs), Community-Based Organisations (CBOs), and individuals could connect, organise, and express their views on specific topics or projects, and it can act as a platform for continuous communication between stakeholders. Setting up decision making bodies with multi stakeholder representation can effectively integrate public participation at the decision-making level and empower the public to drive forward those processes. This is seen as the most successful modality to integrate the public in implementing processes.

Other tools and forms of communication to integrate public participation in climate change adaptation include workshops, roundtable discussions, social media platforms, training and capacity building programmes, national and international networks, and the formation of decision-making bodies that have public representation.

Recommendations

The main obstacle for effective public engagement in climate adaptation practices is that it is often seen as an extra activity to “tick

off” and satisfy international commitments. This is time consuming, cost ineffective, and the promotion of effective, efficient, and desired implementation of public participation is not well understood. Some recommendations to obtain and maintain effective public engagement in climate adaptation practices include training and capacity building, national policies and the law, multiple communication channels, and platforms for engagement.

Training and capacity building are important to ensure that sufficient resources are allocated to train and develop the capacity of implementing institutions and other stakeholders on how to engage the public effectively and efficiently in an object-oriented manner for climate action.

Regarding national policies and the law, international commitments and recommendations made must be directed clearly at the national level through appropriate policies and enacted through the law.

Specific programmes and projects should use multiple channels of communication with stakeholders which include sharing information, obtaining feedback, and grievance handling mechanisms.

Platforms for engagement can help to organise and coordinate public participation to enhance

the voice of the public and allow for public engagement. Mechanisms for enhanced engagement of the public should be created at various level as required by policies, and additional platforms where effective public engagement can facilitate these forums at the local level using monitoring and reporting mechanisms, social media forums, national bodies, and international networks of local CBOs.

This policy brief is part of a series of briefs developed as part of the Technical Examination Process on Adaptation (TEP-A), which in 2020 is focusing on the topic of Education and training, public participation and youth to enhance adaptation action. The brief was developed by SLYCAN Trust (GTE) Ltd. in its capacity as a volunteer expert organization contributing to the TEP-A in 2020.

The TEP-A was established under the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) process in 2015 and seeks to identify concrete opportunities for strengthening resilience, reducing vulnerabilities, and increasing the understanding and implementation of adaptation actions. The process is organized by the SBSTA and SBI and conducted by the Adaptation Committee. For more information see tep-a.org