

Case Study // Round Table SDG 6: Making universal access to water and sanitation a reality in the UNECE region

Ensuring participation of public in water and sanitation related matters in Romania

Romania

Levels: national and local

Summary

Public participation is an important tool in the national, regional or local development activities, imparting quality in decision-making and strengthening the authority of decisions through public support in their implementation. Countries with democratic tradition use this instrument efficiently by always refining their legislative framework to expand public participation to the highest levels of decision-making or state policy formulation, aware of the benefits of public support.

Current environmental policies promote an integrated approach in which the public is a key actor in achieving the objectives of any sectoral policy.

This approach has been promoted in the overall sustainable development process initiated by the United Nations, following the Rio de Janeiro Summit in 1992, where the States Parties signed the Declaration on Environment and Development, recognizing that "one of the main elements indispensable to the achievement sustainable development is public participation in decision making" (Chapter 23 of Agenda 21). In 1998, on 28 July in Aarhus, the European Union and other 39 countries adopted the UNECE Convention on Access to Information, Public Participation in Decision-Making and Access to Justice in Environmental Matters. Romania ratified the Aarhus Convention in 2000. Romania is also Party to the UNECE-WHO Regional Office for Europe Protocol on Water and Health since 2000.

Situation

The Romanian Constitution stipulates that the state is obliged to take measures in order to assure hygiene and public health. The actions of the Romanian authorities are oriented to the extension of the centralized drinking water supply and sanitation systems, including those within the disadvantaged areas.

The provisions of the specific legislation on water and sanitation require access and participation of population in decision making process. For example, according to the provisions of the Drinking Water Quality Law, the authorities with attributes in the field of drinking water supply should ensure the adequate and updated information on quality of water intended for human consumption. Access to information and decision making process is also provided by the Water Law and is available for all the population groups, no matter of their specific situation, income level, etc.

A useful tool to ensure public participation in Romania is the *Guide to Public Participation, 2013*, developed by UNECE under the Protocol on Water and Health, under the leadership of Romania and NGO Women in Europe for a Common Future.

With regard to the implementation of 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, the Protocol on Water and Health is currently the main instrument in Romania to implement the SDG6 and the data collected under the Protocol was very useful in the process of preparation of the 2018 Romanian

Voluntary National Review. The work under the Protocol will therefore support the preparation of the 2018 High Level Political Forum for Sustainable Development.

Strategy

One of the entities with attributions in the field of drinking water supply and sanitation is the Water Company serving the capital of Romania, Bucharest, and it is an example of a successful public-private partnership (as also recognized by the [World Bank report](#)).

This water supply and sanitation company initiated a unique approach aimed at ensuring the involvement of public through consultation and participation. Openness and inclusiveness regarding the services provided, in terms of price setting, roles and responsibility of the water company, as well as investments planned and completed, are considered a priority. A concrete example of issues raised at consultations with public were two public debates held in 2016 regarding the initiation of a pilot project by the water company which would be challenging for the local government which will have to consider replacing the pipes for citizens, as in the case of building blocks and reinforcing buildings with seismic risk.

Most participants of the public debates highlighted openness for dialogue, ensured by this innovative approach, which allowed solving clients' problems. Participants also acknowledged the fact that such consultations have become a normal procedure when dealing with civil society. Approx. 1500 participants in 2016 and 1000 participants in 2017 were involved in public consultations.

The Bucharest water company is considered by the World Bank one of top 5 water companies applying best practices in specific activities to supply drinking water and sanitation as it follows a unique approach at country level which is to involve public through consultation and participation in Company activities. In addition, Bucharest owns one of the newest wastewater treatment plants in Europe, which, after the completion of the second phase, will become one of the most advanced wastewater treatment plants of our region.

Potential for replication

The good practice is that the public participation allows increasing visibility of water and sanitation issues through mediatizing the information from the public consultations. In addition, an important share of those invited to public consultations are administrators of condominiums, thus ensuring direct communication with the objective to inform all the local inhabitants about water supply and sanitation issues.

A good practice to replicate by public authorities competent in the field of drinking water supply and sanitation would be:

- inviting relevant stakeholders with which the company interacts (clients, employees, media, local and central public institutions (including ministries with competencies in the field), NGOs) to the public consultations held by the water and sanitation operators;
- organizing press conferences in the beginning of the public debates.

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