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## Caring for the Wadden Sea as an Interactive Process

A workshop on public participation, Nieuweschans (NL), 13-15 October 1999

### General background

At the 7<sup>th</sup> Trilateral Governmental Wadden Sea Conference in Stade in October 1997, the ministers agreed 'to explore possibilities to enhance the quality of public participation and WELCOME the initiative of The Netherlands to organize a workshop for that purpose' (§ 35 Stade Declaration).

As a follow-up of this agreement, the Dutch Ministry of Agriculture, Nature Management and Fisheries had taken the initiative to organize and finance this workshop in cooperation with representatives from Dutch and German (Schleswig-Holstein) authorities, as well as from the Common Wadden Sea Secretariat and EcoMare.

### Public participation: problems and perspectives

One of the main objectives of the Wadden Sea Plan, as adopted by the ministers of the three countries in Stade, is to maintain an ecologically and environmentally high quality Wadden Sea area. In order to reach that objective, both governments, inhabitants, users and visitors have a joint responsibility. Even more so, it was agreed that the execution of a great number of activities would take place in co-operation with other governments, with non-governmental interest groups and with all kinds of intermediate organizations. The question how this can be taken up in the various countries, was the key question of this workshop.

It has become obvious that the traditional role of governments as a sole regulator is changing. Stakeholders play their roles starting in the pre-recognition phase of problems. The public, NGOs, intermediate organizations and governments themselves have to get used to a new balance in roles. As important as the debate about roles is to accept the fact that no party alone can reach its own goals without others anymore. Even the government has not the sole power anymore to change society. This fact puts a firm basis under the mutually felt need to cooperate and communicate, also in the case of sustainable management of the Wadden Sea area.

The workshop worked on the following objectives:

1. A common language with regard to the concept of 'public participation' including a common problem description concerning information, policy-communication and education.
2. Adequate participation and communication in forthcoming situations concerning the Wadden Sea Area, including a common view on roles of governments and stakeholders.

An intended result of the workshop, therefore, was to produce a set of general guidelines for participation situations.

### Results of the workshop

The workshop had various issues. On the one hand, the organizers had designed a number of formal programs within the workshop, like the discussions about instruments of participation (information centers/networks, do's and don'ts in participation, the use of media) and of the various responsibilities and roles of all concerned. Real issues (co-management in fishing-policy, recreation and tourism, Habitat and Bird Directives in national parks, and coastal protection) were used as examples to discuss the issues of the first day.

It turned out that the participants of the workshop found especially the following themes of interest:

- ethics in behavior during participation processes,
- rules to use the media,
- adopting new roles of all concerned,
- accessibility of (governmental) information.

The general conclusion of the participants after the first day was that a special need was felt for independent mediators (who should guide participation processes) and for independent centers (disseminating clear, accessible information). The real issue-based discussions led to statements and conclusions such as:

#### *Sustainable recreation and tourism*

'Conditions for a successful participation are to work on a common aim. It is in the interest of all groups to work together. Start formulating the common target, then work out all the problems

to reach it. For many participating groups, it is an eye-opener, when they recognize that development is not growth, but better quality. Also, nature conservation groups will be more effective, when they realize that they achieve more through negotiations at the negotiation table.

#### *Co-management (fisheries)*

'A total view is needed: isolated problem solving is undesirable (example: 'fishery increase or fishery decrease' should be connected to problems of nature conservation like 'no hunting in nature areas').

#### *Habitat and Bird Directives in relation to national parks*

'If there are only rules that have to be implemented, do not suggest that people can influence this process. Be clear and honest'.

#### *Coastal protection (salt marshes)*

'It [an interactive, open planning procedure - CMG] seems to create more trust (on the islands/in the community), which is important for future processes'.

The final results of the workshop are given below as they were summarized during the last session. The popularity of the conclusions, as defined by the participants - split up in national groups, were ranked; those given medium and highest priorities are listed below:

#### *Actors*

Allow for learning to get to know each other (interests, perceptions, common language, take each other seriously, do not view the others as enemies).

- All potential stakeholders must have the opportunity to take part in the process.
- Trust, openness and respect for the others are expected from all participants.

#### *Media*

- Update of IT-media.
- Media should be used to translate national and international issues into locally understandable language.

#### *Networks and centers*

- Information relevant for the participation process should be made available and prepared in an understandable form.

#### *Other items*

- A mediator is needed who is accepted by all participants and is consequently independent.

## Reflection

The first needs as expressed by the participants of the workshop seem to be defined well by words like trust, understanding, respect, credibility etc. Meaning that, in their view, the main conditions for

open policy-processes have obviously not yet been fulfilled. This psychological aspect of participation processes is so deeply-rooted that quite an effort should be made to bring parties together.

Secondly, those directly involved in the Wadden Sea area take a great amount of pride in contributing to its quality. Even if this is not in line with (national) governmental plans, these people should be seen as partners and not as those opposing this quality.

The principle, which (especially national) governments should adopt here, is to leave as much as possible to the executive level, to be carried out by the community and to intervene only if a direct need is present. E.g. this can be the case when (inter-) governmental agreements threaten to be violated or when international directives are not respected. If well played, such a form of self-governance may enhance the quality of the area more than with overall governmental measures.

Thirdly, (local) media, centers and networks are indispensable facilities in communicating with the actors in the field. As the interviews revealed, the Wadden Sea (area) evokes strong emotions in the public, in visitors and in economic users. This raises the need for intermediate institutions that are, in a communication sense, trustworthy to those involved.

## Conclusion

The most obvious conclusion that can be drawn from this workshop, is that people want to be taken seriously in their strivings to enhance the quality of the Wadden Sea Area. One condition to this is that governments give space for debate at moments when decisions are still far from being taken. The other condition, however, is that actors of different kind will put their own interests or values in perspective in order to come to a joint problem definition and a joint direction for solutions. If this cannot be reached, communication will be restricted to mainly information dissemination. The third condition is that both governments and actors are committing themselves to such a process, e.g. through a covenant.

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