

Resident Involvement in Water Management Programs; The Lerma–Chapala Case Study

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Research Summary

Water management programs in Mexico had generally been implemented through a combination of three institutional instruments: legal regulation, economic incentives, and public involvement. Despite these arrangements, however, water management policies and projects continued to generate public controversy and local opposition, frequently delaying their implementation.

Stronger water-related legislation increasingly emphasised integrated water management through greater stakeholder involvement. Nevertheless, the formal existence of participatory procedures did not necessarily lead to public understanding or social acceptance of water management programs.

Against this background, the study examined residents' perceptions of consultation and participation in water management programs in the Lerma–Chapala Basin, Mexico. Its principal objective was to explore the relationship between the level of public participation and the social acceptance of water management programs.

The researchers first reviewed the relevant literature and developed an analytical framework consisting of nine key elements for evaluating the adequacy of consultation and four levels of public participation. A questionnaire survey was then conducted in 12 cities within the Lerma–Chapala Basin, and the results were analysed statistically.

Criteria for Evaluating Consultation

The adequacy of the consultation process was assessed by considering whether:

the political and cultural context and general conditions of the affected area had been properly understood;

all relevant stakeholder groups had been identified;

the principal issues requiring consultation had been clearly defined;

appropriate methods of communication and information exchange had been evaluated;

communication methods suited to specific stakeholder groups had been established;
openness and transparency in the exchange of information had been secured;
implementation of the consultation plan had been monitored;
the effectiveness of public consultation activities had been evaluated; and
the influence of the consultation plan on the proposed program and decision-making had been assessed.

This framework treated consultation not as a single meeting or opportunity to submit comments, but as a continuous process extending from stakeholder identification and information disclosure to monitoring, evaluation, and influence on decision-making.

Four Levels of Public Participation

The study classified public participation into four levels.

Level 1: One-way provision of information

Residents exist primarily as recipients of information. Information flows in one direction from government authorities to the public, with little or no opportunity for residents to ask questions or express their views.

Level 2: Limited consultation

Communication remains largely one-way. However, residents may respond to questions posed by the authorities or express limited views through informal seminars, explanatory meetings, or public hearings.

Level 3: Two-way communication

Residents and public authorities exchange information in both directions, and residents are able to express their opinions. However, there is no assurance that those opinions will influence the outcome of consultation or the final decision.

Level 4: Shared influence over decision-making

Two-way communication takes place, and residents or other stakeholders share a degree of authority and are able to exert a meaningful influence on planning and decision-making.

This classification assessed participation not only by the amount of information provided, but also by the extent to which residents were able to influence actual decisions.

Major Findings

The study found that residents' perceptions of consultation were influenced by several factors. One of the most important was the absence of adequate information—or the provision of incorrect or misleading information—about the nature of a proposed program.

When residents do not receive sufficient information about the purpose, likely benefits, potential disadvantages, costs, and risks of a water management program, they cannot properly assess the proposal. This can increase mistrust toward public authorities and lead to criticism, resistance, and delays in implementation.

The study therefore emphasised that information should be provided as early as possible. It should present not only the expected advantages of a program but also its possible disadvantages and negative impacts. Stakeholders should also be given sufficient time to review the information and develop informed opinions.

Approximately three-quarters of the respondents assessed the existing participation process as Level 2. This indicated that most residents believed they had received information and had limited opportunities to respond to questions, but had not participated meaningfully in the planning or decision-making processes of the water management programs.

In other words, formal consultation mechanisms existed, but participation had not reached the point where residents could substantially influence program design or final decisions. Such limited involvement was unlikely to build strong public trust or social acceptance.

The Lerma–Chapala case did not identify a definitive combination of consultation and participation mechanisms that would automatically ensure the social acceptance of water management programs. Nevertheless, the study suggested that acceptance would be more likely when all relevant stakeholders were included, accurate and balanced information was provided from an early stage, communication was genuinely two-way, and the process approached Level 4 participation, in which the public shared some influence over decision-making.

Research Significance

The study demonstrated that public participation should not remain limited to distributing information or collecting public responses. Meaningful participation requires residents to receive sufficient information, engage in two-way communication, and have a genuine opportunity for their views to influence planning and decision-making.

It also treated public participation and social acceptance as closely connected rather than separate issues. Public opposition may arise not only because residents lack information or misunderstand a policy, but also because they perceive that opportunities for participation are limited and that their views have little influence on the outcome.

Improving the social acceptance of water management programs therefore requires more than one-way information provision. It calls for early engagement, transparent and balanced information disclosure, two-way communication, inclusive stakeholder participation, and some degree of shared influence over decision-making.

This study can also be seen as an important link between earlier research on Public Participation and the later development of research on Consensus Building and Social Acceptance.