


Chapter 14

Rethinking Citizen Participation in the Implementation of Environmental Projects: Toward a Unified Conceptual Understanding

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ABSTRACT

This chapter proposes a clearer and more holistic framework for understanding citizen engagement not only in decision-making but also in the implementation of environmental initiatives. Through a structured conceptual review of key theories, typologies, and related concepts, we highlight the overlooked role of citizens during the implementation phase, where authority-led action often dominates. We examine how this gap undermines inclusive governance and explore how implementation fits within the broader environmental project lifecycle. The chapter also analyzes related constructs such as co-production, co-design, co-creation and involvement clarifying their complementary roles in participatory implementation. Drawing from previous research, we underscore how sustained engagement fosters community ownership and

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long-term change. The integrative framework we propose refines the understanding of citizens' participation across project phases, advocating for a more inclusive and precise conceptualization to enhance future research and governance effectiveness.

INTRODUCTION

“What we have ignored is what citizens can do and the importance of real involvement of the people involved – versus just having somebody in Washington make a rule.”

— Elinor Ostrom

In an era characterized by growing environmental challenges and the persistent need to adopt more sustainable development pathways, citizen engagement has become an essential pillar of environmental governance. The implementation of pro-environmental initiatives, in particular, increasingly depends on inclusive and participatory mechanisms that move beyond traditional top-down approaches. As highlighted by Gelderman et al. (2017), many municipalities and local governments are actively formulating comprehensive sustainability agendas that embed environmental principles across various domains of public service — from waste reduction, recycling, and reuse, to the protection of vital natural resources such as water, soil, biodiversity, and non-renewable assets. Within this evolving landscape, involving citizens not only enhances the perceived legitimacy of environmental actions but also strengthens their effectiveness by tapping into local knowledge, fostering collective responsibility, and reinforcing community ownership.

Scholars emphasize that initiatives grounded in shared governance and collective responsibility are more likely to foster meaningful behavioral change and generate lasting environmental benefits. This shift reflects a growing recognition that sustainable solutions must be co-designed and implemented with the active involvement of the communities they intend to serve. As Baxter (2022) observes, the emergence of collaborative environmental projects is driven by several converging factors — notably, citizens' increasing aspiration to contribute to solving societal challenges, the perceived inadequacies or limitations in governmental responses, and the appeal of local-level initiatives that offer closer engagement, stronger influence over outcomes, and greater transparency in the decision-making process. These dynamics highlight the importance of inclusive mechanisms that empower communities not only to participate, but also to shape and monitor the environmental actions that directly affect them.

Flexible and transparent decision-making is crucial for addressing the complex and evolving nature of environmental challenges, as it lays the foundation for more inclusive, adaptive, and legitimate forms of environmental governance (Miller &

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