



RETOUCH NEXUS

REsilient water gOvernance Under climate CHange
within the WEF E NEXUS

Deliverable D2.5

Handbook on innovative mechanisms and success
factors for stakeholder engagement and public
participation in cross-sectoral water governance

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Abbreviation

CIW	Coordination Committee on Integral Water Policy (Coördinatiecommissie Integraal Waterbeleid) — Belgium
CoP	Community of Practice
CS	Case Study
DWG	De Watergroep
ERA	Environment and Resources Authority — Malta
EU	European Union
EWA	Energy and Water Agency — Malta
Gtl	Greening the Islands
GTI app	Greening the Islands application
HHNK	Hoogheemraadschap Hollands Noorderkwartier
MARD	Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development — Slovakia
MECP	Ministry of Environment and Consumer Protection — Bavaria, Germany
MEEE	Ministry of Environment, Energy and Enterprise — Malta
METDC	Ministry of Ecological Transition and Demographic Challenge — Spain
ME	Ministry of Environment — Slovakia
MIWM	Ministry of Infrastructure and Water Management — Netherlands
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisation
NWA	National Water Authority — Spain
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
RegOb / RegOfr	Regierung Oberfranken
RRI	Responsible Research and Innovation
RWS	Rijkswaterstaat — Netherlands
SUA	Slovak University of Agriculture
SWME	South-Western Management Entity — Slovakia



TUM	Technical University of Munich (Technische Universität München)
UPV	Universitat Politècnica de València
VITO	Vlaamse Instelling voor Technologisch Onderzoek
VUA	Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam
WEFE	Water-Energy-Food-Ecosystem
WFD	Water Framework Directive



Executive summary

Effective water governance under the pressures of climate change demands more than technical solutions. It requires the active, sustained involvement of the full range of actors who depend on, manage and are affected by water systems across sectors, governance levels and communities. This handbook, developed within the RETOUCH NEXUS project, documents innovative mechanisms for stakeholder engagement and public participation tested and refined across six European case studies. It is designed as a practical, transferable resource for practitioners, policymakers and researchers working on water governance and beyond.

What makes this handbook distinctive is its grounding in real implementation experience. The mechanisms presented here were not developed in isolation or derived from theory alone but were applied under established governance conditions, in contexts as diverse as industrial water reuse in Belgium, island water scarcity in Malta, freshwater programme development in the Netherlands, and cross-sectoral WEFE Nexus governance in Germany, Slovakia and Spain. This diversity demonstrates that innovative engagement can function across very different institutional landscapes, stakeholder communities and resource levels, provided methods are carefully chosen, context-adapted and consistently applied.

Innovation in stakeholder engagement, as defined in this handbook, is a deliberate shift away from traditional, one-way communication and consultation models towards collaborative, co-creative and participatory approaches that actively involve diverse stakeholders throughout the governance process from problem framing to solution design and implementation. This is not merely a methodological shift. It reflects a deeper change in the role assigned to stakeholders: from passive recipients of information to active co-producers of knowledge and governance outcomes. It also responds directly to the expectations of the Horizon Europe programme, which frames innovation broadly *encompassing social, organisational and governance innovation alongside technological advancement* and calls for early, continuous and meaningful engagement as a condition of responsible, publicly funded research.

Drawing on the experience of the six RETOUCH NEXUS case studies, the handbook identifies and documents **five categories of innovative engagement mechanisms**:

1. **Creative Communication Strategies** use non-traditional media and storytelling to translate complex water governance topics into accessible narratives, reaching broader and more diverse audiences including those who would not typically engage with technical formats.
2. **Communities of Practice** are sustained, cross-sectoral dialogue formats that foster shared learning, mutual trust and co-creation among diverse actor groups over time. Their recurring structure and stable membership allow relationships and shared understanding to deepen progressively — an outcome that one-off consultations cannot achieve.
3. **Fostering Youth Involvement** encompasses engagement strategies specifically designed to include younger generations — from school children to university students — as current contributors to water governance, not merely future stakeholders. The project also developed dedicated safeguarding templates for the responsible involvement of minors, including parental consent forms and GDPR-compliant data protection protocols, offering a replicable framework for other projects.



4. **Digital Tools and Platforms** leverage technology to extend participation into the digital realm, making complex governance data accessible, visible and actionable for a wider range of stakeholders, including those constrained by geography or institutional access.
5. **Interactive Learning Experiences** move beyond presentation formats to create spaces for active participation, experiential understanding and collaborative exploration — making abstract WEFE Nexus trade-offs tangible and engaging for diverse audiences.

For each category, the handbook provides an overview of key implementation considerations, an honest assessment of advantages and limitations, and a practical "Do It Yourself" guide enabling adaptation and replication in different contexts.

A few considerations. Innovative engagement approaches are not universally applicable, and this handbook does not advocate for their uncritical adoption. They are typically more resource-intensive than conventional formats and their success depend on the capacities, motivations and institutional contexts of those involved. Co-creation can raise expectations that governance systems are not yet equipped to meet; digital tools can inadvertently exclude less digitally literate participants; and immersive or creative formats must be carefully managed to preserve technical rigour. Practitioners are encouraged to use this handbook as a basis for informed, context-sensitive decision-making — selecting and adapting mechanisms honestly, with clear-eyed awareness of their limitations and of what participation can realistically deliver within any given governance setting.



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1. Introduction

Purpose of this Handbook

This handbook serves as a practical resource for practitioners, policymakers, and researchers involved in water governance and stakeholder engagement. It documents and reflects on innovative mechanisms for stakeholder engagement and public participation that were developed and applied within the context of the RETOUCH Nexus project. The handbook aims to bridge the gap between conceptual approaches and real-world practice by presenting concrete examples, lessons learned, and actionable guidance making it a transferable resource for those seeking to strengthen participatory processes in cross-sectoral water governance beyond the project's own case studies.

RETOUCH Nexus advances resilient and participatory water governance by addressing the complex interlinkages between the Water Energy Food Ecosystem (WEFE) Nexus under the pressures of climate change. A central pillar of RETOUCH Nexus is its network of six diverse case studies across Europe, each embedded in distinct governance, climatic, and socio-economic contexts. These case studies served as living laboratories for testing and refining innovative stakeholder engagement methods, which are the foundation of this handbook:

Table 1. RETOUCH Nexus – Case studies and their focus

Case Study	Focus
WaterProof, Belgium	Developing water pricing mechanisms for rainwater reuse in business parks and residential areas; climate resilience.
Upper Main, Germany	Transitioning to digitally driven, participatory water governance and improving coordination among stakeholders.
Jucar River Basin, Spain	Ensuring sustainable water supply for Valencia; addressing drought, over-exploitation, and affordability issues.
Maltese River Basin District, Malta	Managing water scarcity through non-conventional sources (desalination, reclamation) in a densely populated area.
Dutch HHNK, Netherlands	Developing an innovative freshwater availability programme through early stakeholder inclusion and new participatory engagement approaches, guided by the regional water authority HHNK.
South-Western Slovakia	Tackling flooding, drought, water insecurity, and biodiversity loss; improving water retention and land management.

The innovative methods presented throughout this handbook were not developed in isolation they were implemented directly by the case studies across WPs and other activities across the project as part of their stakeholder engagement activities. The handbook therefore reflects genuine on-the-ground experience, translating practice into replicable guidance



Structure of the Handbook – Innovation categories

The handbook is organised around **five categories of innovation** in stakeholder engagement and public participation, each reflecting a distinct approach to moving beyond traditional, one-way communication or consultation models:

1. **Creative Communication Strategies** (*Section 3.1*) Innovative use of non-traditional media and storytelling to reach broader audiences and make complex water governance topics accessible including podcasts and online video reports. Examples: *The RETOUCH Nexus Narratives Podcast* and the *Online Video Report from the Belgian sub-case Agnetenpark*.
2. **Communities of Practice** (*Section 3.2*) Sustained, cross-sectoral dialogue formats that foster shared learning and co-creation among diverse actor groups. Examples: *Business Breakfasts and Living Labs in Malta* and *Exchange with Financial Experts on Water Investments in Belgium*.
3. **Fostering Youth Involvement** (*Section 3.3*) Targeted engagement approaches designed to include younger generations in water governance conversations. Examples: *Use of the GTI App by Students in Slovakia*, *Workshop in an Elementary School in Germany* and *Art Research Project in a High-School in the Netherlands*.
4. **Digital Tools and Platforms** (*Section 3.4*) Leveraging technology to extend participation into the digital realm and improve accessibility. Example: *Training on a Water Governance Indicators App* and the RETOUCH NEXUS Case Studies Dashboard.
5. **Interactive Learning Experiences** (*Section 3.5*) Experimental and hands-on methods that make complex WEFE Nexus trade-offs tangible and engaging. Examples: *World Café Method in a workshop with students in Germany*, *Water Experience Container in Belgium*, and the third workshop in a series conducted with the water authority *HHNK in the Netherlands*.

Each section follows a consistent structure: an overview of the category, key aspects for implementation and an assessment of advantages and limitations. The implementation of each innovative mechanism within the RETOUCH Nexus project is presented in the sub-sections, highlighting lessons learned and providing a “Do It Yourself” guide with practical steps for implementation enabling the adaptation and replication of these mechanisms in different contexts.



2. Innovation in stakeholder engagement and public participation strategies

2.1 Defining innovation in stakeholder engagement and public participation

Water governance is a particularly complex and fragmented policy domain. Unlike other resource sectors, water involves a highly decentralised institutional architecture, spanning national, regional and local authorities, river basin managers, utilities, agricultural users, environmental regulators and civil society organisations, among others. Due to this structural fragmentation of the sector, no single actor holds sufficient authority, knowledge, or resources to sustainably govern alone over water issues. Effective water governance depends therefore on the capacity of diverse actors to communicate, coordinate and collaborate across institutional borders.

This challenge is further compounded when water governance themes are approached within the Water-Energy-Food-Ecosystem (WEFE) Nexus framework, which recognises that these sectors operate in interdependent manner, with decisions in one sector generating trade-offs and co-benefits in others. Sustainable governance of these interlinkages requires coordinating across sectoral silos that have historically operated with separate mandates, distinct stakeholder communities and divergent planning horizons.

In this context, stakeholder engagement and public participation are not procedural add-ons to water governance, but rather a structural necessity. The OECD identifies engagement as one of its twelve core Principles on Water Governance, arguing that inclusive processes help align divergent interests, build trust, surface local knowledge, and improve the legitimacy of governance outcomes (OECD, 2015). Stakeholder engagement and public participation are not new to the sector. Consultation processes, public hearings and awareness-raising campaigns have long been standard practice. What is new, and what this handbook documents, is a deliberate and consequential shift in *how* that engagement is designed and delivered. The past decade has seen a notable shift in how stakeholder engagement is approached in the water sector, with top-down, hierarchical models being increasingly supplemented, and in some contexts replaced by more collaborative, multi-actor, and multi-directional processes. The shift reflects broader societal trends towards participatory governance, as well as growing recognition that technical solutions alone are insufficient to address the complexity of water and the WEFE Nexus challenges.

Within the RETOUCH NEXUS project, case studies did not simply apply familiar methods in new settings of stakeholder engagement and public participation. They tested, adapted and combined approaches in ways that meaningfully changed the role of stakeholders in the governance process, and it is this change that this handbook characterises as innovation.

How is innovation defined in this handbook?

Innovation, as used in this handbook, refers to a shift away from traditional, one-way communication and consultation models towards **collaborative, co-creative and participatory approaches** that actively involve diverse stakeholders throughout the governance process from problem framing to solution design and implementation.

This shift is not merely methodological. It reflects a deeper change in the *role* assigned to stakeholders: from passive recipients of information to active contributors to knowledge and governance outcomes.



It also responds to an explicit expectation of the Horizon Europe programme, which frames innovation broadly — encompassing social, organisational and governance innovation alongside technological advancement — and calls for early, continuous and meaningful engagement as a condition of responsible, publicly funded research (European Commission, 2021; Horizon Europe Programme Guide). In this sense, the RETOUCH NEXUS project's commitment to innovative engagement is not incidental — it is embedded in the programme logic within which the project operates.

Critically, what counts as innovative is not universal. Innovation is inherently context-dependent: a mechanism that represents a meaningful departure from established practice in one governance setting may be routine in another. A digital participation platform may be genuinely transformative in a context where engagement has historically been limited to formal public consultations, while a face-to-face living laboratory may represent the greater innovation where digital tools have become standard. Similarly, the stakeholders involved will determine what is possible and appropriate in the implementation of innovative mechanisms: their capacities, familiarity with the method, institutional roles and social dynamics condition how these mechanisms can be designed and employed.

Characteristics of innovative mechanisms

Not every stakeholder engagement activity is innovative by the definition above. What distinguishes an innovative mechanism is the presence of one or more of the following characteristics — and, crucially, their purposeful combination in response to a specific governance context. The mechanisms documented in this handbook are innovative precisely because they bring these features together in a deliberate, evidence-informed way, rather than applying any single characteristic in isolation.

- **Co-creation and co-design:** Stakeholders do not merely validate predetermined outcomes — they actively shape the agenda, the methods and the results of engagement activities. This distinguishes genuine participation from tokenism (Fung, 2006; Innes & Booher, 2003).
- **Early and continuous engagement:** Stakeholders are involved from the conception of research questions through to implementation, ensuring that their knowledge, needs and priorities inform the process at every stage — not only at the end, when decisions have already been made (Pahl-Wostl, 2009).
- **Digital and interactive tools:** Technology is used not as an add-on but as a means of making participation more accessible, scalable and responsive — through apps, online platforms, dashboards and digital games that extend engagement beyond traditional stakeholder circles (OECD, 2020).
- **Context-specific tailoring:** Methods are adapted to the specific governance, legal, cultural and social contexts of each setting, rather than applied as a one-size-fits-all template. This is a defining feature of the RETOUCH NEXUS case studies, which span six distinct European governance contexts.
- **Multi-actor and multi-level approaches:** Innovative engagement deliberately brings together actors from different sectors, governance levels and disciplines in structured dialogue — surfacing trade-offs that remain invisible when engagement is siloed within a single sector or institution.



- **Mixed-modal formats:** In-person, hybrid and digital formats are combined to ensure that participation is not limited by geography, capacity or individual preference.
- **Interactive and experimental methods:** Formats such as games, World Café, living labs and role-playing make complex WEFE Nexus trade-offs tangible and accessible — enabling stakeholders who may not engage with technical documents to contribute meaningfully (Beierle & Cayford, 2002).
- **Capacity building and skills transfer:** Innovative mechanisms do not only extract stakeholder input — they build the competencies of participants and institutions, creating lasting governance capacity that extends beyond the project's own lifespan.
- **Flexibility and adaptability:** Methods are designed to respond to evolving stakeholder needs and governance contexts, with feedback loops built in to enable continuous learning and improvement.
- **Inclusion of marginalised and end-user groups:** Targeted outreach, accessible language, age-appropriate formats and structured incentives ensure that engagement reaches beyond the usual suspects — bringing in youth, farming communities, civil society and the general public alongside technical experts and authorities (OECD, 2020; Bryson et al., 2014).

Why is innovation important in stakeholder engagement and public participation?

The case for innovation in stakeholder engagement is not simply a matter of using new or interesting methods. It is rooted in the recognised limitations of conventional approaches and in the specific demands posed by complex, cross-sectoral governance challenges such as the WEFE Nexus. The following points set out why moving beyond traditional models matters both in general terms and in the specific context of RETOUCH NEXUS.

- **Traditional models are no longer sufficient for complex governance challenges.** One-way information provision and single-event consultations have consistently proven inadequate for addressing cross-sectoral and multi-level governance challenges where trade-offs are contested and solutions require buy-in from diverse actors (Fung, 2006; Innes & Booher, 2003).
- **Innovation drives legitimacy and trust.** Participatory and co-creative approaches strengthen the legitimacy of governance decisions by ensuring that affected communities and end-users are genuinely heard — not merely consulted as a formality. Sustained engagement builds social capital and trust, which are preconditions for adaptive and resilient governance (Pahl-Wostl, 2009; Bryson et al., 2014).
- **It is an explicit expectation of Horizon Europe.** The programme's emphasis on Responsible Research and Innovation (RRI) places early and continuous stakeholder engagement at the heart of publicly funded research, expecting projects to move beyond dissemination towards genuine co-creation and societal embedding. The Rome Declaration affirmed that "early and continuous engagement of stakeholders is essential for sustainable, desirable and acceptable innovation" (European Union, 2014; European Commission, 2021).
- **Innovation in engagement broadens participation and reduces exclusion.** Conventional methods tend to systematically exclude marginalised groups, non-expert publics and younger



generations. Innovative approaches — from digital tools and apps to immersive installations and youth-targeted activities — actively lower barriers to participation and reach audiences that traditional formats miss (OECD, 2020; Beierle & Cayford, 2002).

- **It improves the quality and uptake of research outputs.** Co-designed processes ensure that research questions, tools and results are relevant to real governance needs. Feedback loops between researchers and stakeholders as practiced consistently across the RETOUCH NEXUS case studies — improve the quality of analysis and increase the likelihood that outputs are used and acted upon by decision-makers.
- **Innovation supports adaptive and iterative governance.** Complex challenges such as climate change, water scarcity and the WEFE Nexus are inherently dynamic. Innovative engagement mechanisms — particularly Communities of Practice and iterative workshop series — build the capacity of institutions and stakeholders to learn, adapt and respond to changing conditions over time (Pahl-Wostl, 2009; Ansell & Torfing, 2015).
- **It generates lasting capacity beyond the project lifecycle.** Skills transfer workshops, youth involvement activities and digital platforms build stakeholder competencies that outlast any single project, contributing to a more capable, engaged and resilient governance ecosystem.

Recognising the limitations of innovative approaches

Innovation in stakeholder engagement is not without its challenges. Innovative mechanisms are typically more resource-intensive than conventional formats — they require greater investment in design, facilitation, technical infrastructure and follow-up, and they demand flexibility and adaptive capacity from the teams implementing them. They may also introduce new risks: digital tools can exclude less digitally literate participants; creative formats may oversimplify complex technical content; and co-creation processes, if not carefully managed, can raise expectations that governance systems are not yet equipped to meet.

It is important, therefore, to approach innovation in engagement not as an end in itself, but as a means to more legitimate, effective and inclusive governance. Each mechanism documented in this handbook includes an explicit assessment of its advantages and limitations, presented as a structured overview of pros and cons. These assessments are intended to support practitioners in making informed choices about which mechanisms are appropriate for their context, their stakeholder landscape and their available resources — and to be transparent about the conditions under which innovation delivers value and those where it may fall short.



2.2 Innovative engagement mechanisms in the RETOUCH Nexus Case Studies

2.2.1 Overview of stakeholder engagement activities implemented by RETOUCH Nexus Case Studies

Across the six RETOUCH Nexus case studies, partners have piloted a diverse set of stakeholder engagement approaches that were identified as innovative and includes living-lab workshops, business breakfasts and scenario-based dialogues to podcasts, newspaper-style narratives and digital tools, tailored to the specific governance contexts and stakeholder landscapes of each site. These innovations reflect a deliberate shift towards more participatory, cross-sectoral and digitally enabled water governance, embedding co-creation, feedback loops and concise, accessible communication as core principles for bridging analytical insights with practical decision-making.

Belgium

The Belgian case study focuses on the Tielt Business Park, a demonstration site for innovative and sustainable water management in industrial zone, forming part of the broader “WaterProof” initiative aimed at developing climate-resilient solutions. The overall objective of the case study is to build on existing progress to enhance stakeholder engagement, maintain active participation and scale up best practices for addressing water scarcity and quality challenges. Stakeholder engagement activities in Belgium concentrated on raising awareness, fostering cooperation, and gathering feedback on project results, with workshops and awareness-raising sessions being the most frequently used formats. The Belgian engagement strategy is notably tailored to the diverse motivations of stakeholder groups. Industry and business partners comprised the largest share of participants, followed by local authorities and innovators, reflecting the relevance of these stakeholders for water governance at the business park level.

Germany

The Upper Main case study in Bavaria aims to contribute to the modernisation of water governance by transitioning from a traditional top-down approach to a digitally driven, participatory model that strengthens communication, coordination and cooperation among institutions and water users. Stakeholder engagement activities in Germany focused on informing participants about the RETOUCH Nexus project and facilitating cross-sector dialogue with awareness-raising activities and workshops being the most common engagement formats. The case study leverages established platforms such as the River Paradise Upper Franconia, the Ecological Education Centre, and the Round Table Upper Franconia to support education and dialogue. Regional authorities and research communities comprised the largest participant shares in activities conducted by the German case study.

Malta

The Malta case study aims to strengthen governance mechanisms to better withstand challenges posed by water scarcity and climate-related pressures – issues particularly acute in Malta’s island context. Stakeholder engagement activities employed a varied and sustained set of mechanisms, including business breakfasts and living-lab workshops with interactive, roundtable, formats that facilitate open dialogue and co-creation, complemented by regular newsletters, meetings, and an online tool that extended participation into the digital realm for ongoing feedback and visibility of WEF-related trade-offs. The ongoing cross-sectoral cooperation character of the activities implemented by the Maltese case study culminated in the emergence of a Community of Practice



(CoP) addressing WEFE issues. The use of concise, interactive formats and targeted communication has improved message uptake and fostered a shared vocabulary for collaborative problem-solving. Local authorities, associations and specific end-users corresponded to the majority of participants in the engagement activities implemented in Malta.

Netherlands

The Netherlands case study supports the Water Authority HHNK in shaping the Freshwater Availability Programme for North Holland, embedding a participatory track to address escalating water-scarcity risks driven by climate change, sea-level rise and growing regional demands. Stakeholder engagement activities focused on closing data gaps, problem-solving and raising stakeholder awareness, with workshops and trainings serving as the main engagement tools. A distinctive element of the engagement strategy is the establishment of a coherent, staged participatory pathway that translates participation from concept into practice through tailored methods, roles and boundaries specific to HHNK's governance context. Workshops conducted with HHNK have helped clarify governance touchpoints, surface priority information gaps, and create feedback loops linking technical analysis with stakeholder insight, while internally strengthening HHNK's skills for facilitation of participatory processes.

Slovakia

The Slovakia case study addresses a comprehensive set of challenges including floods, droughts, water insecurity, desertification, biodiversity loss and land fragmentation, with a focus on strengthening water governance for climate-resilient agriculture and sustainable water use through the application of the WEFE Nexus framework. Stakeholder engagement activities in Slovakia combined workshops, trainings, awareness-raising events, podcast episodes and tailored touchpoints to reach diverse audiences. The number of planned workshops by the case study was deliberately reduced to ensure effective participation and bring together a diverse range of stakeholders including national authorities, business partners, civil society and farming communities to surface trade-offs and make complex NEXUS topics accessible and actionable. Through clear, creative communication and continuous feedback loops, the case study has improved multi-actor coordination and begun embedding WEFE considerations into ongoing planning.

Spain

The Spanish case study aims to improve water governance schemes and embed effective economic instruments within a WEFE Nexus framing, with water pricing set as the strategic entry point, building on the Júcar River Basin's existing science-policy interface and stakeholder engagement foundations laid by the GONEXUS project. Engagement activities included workshops exploring water pricing and government challenges, scenario-based dialogues representing WEFE Nexus sectors, and innovative tools such as newspapers-style narratives and a podcast episode that extended outreach beyond traditional formats. A distinctive element of the engagement strategy is the strong emphasis on co-development, with stakeholders contributing with feedback to refine the modelling suite and enhance the quality and relevance of the analysis. Overall, the Spanish case study contributed to building a shared understanding of pressing challenges such as water scarcity, sectoral competition and climate risks, while introducing economic tools and risk-sharing mechanisms. With this participatory, evidence-based approach, the case study bridges analytic insights with practical governance, bringing together authorities, economists, civil society, industry and academia.



Table 2. Overview of stakeholder engagement activities conducted by RETOUCH Nexus Case Studies

Case Study	Main forms of stakeholder engagement	Main goals of stakeholder engagement activities	Main engaged stakeholders in implemented activities
Belgium 	36% Awareness raising 23% Workshop 16% Training 16% Citizen engagement	→ Raise awareness among stakeholders → Encourage stakeholder cooperation → Provide feedback on project results	29% Industry/ business partners 16% Local authorities 13% Innovators
Germany 	42% Awareness raising 32% Workshop 10% Citizen engagement	→ Encourage stakeholder cooperation → Inform about RETOUCH Nexus project → Provide feedback on project results	23% Research communities 20% Regional authorities 14% Associations
Malta 	67% Awareness raising 33% Workshop	→ Raise awareness among stakeholders → Encourage stakeholder cooperation → Inform about RETOUCH Nexus project	34% Local authorities 33% Specific end-users (e.g. farmers) 33% Associations
Netherlands 	62% Workshop 13% Awareness raising 12% Training	→ Close data gaps → Problem solving → Raise awareness among stakeholders	70% Regional authorities 20% Research communities 10% Associations
Slovakia 	30% Workshop 20% Training 20% Awareness raising 20% Podcast episode	→ Raise awareness among stakeholders → Encourage stakeholder cooperation → Inform about RETOUCH Nexus project	19% National authorities 13% Industry/ business partners 13% Civil society
Spain 	40% Workshop 20% Awareness 20% Podcast episode 20% Citizen engagement	→ Raise awareness among stakeholders → Encourage stakeholder cooperation → Close data gaps	15% Industry/ business partners 14% Regional authorities 14% Civil society



2.2.2 Innovation in stakeholder engagement activities conducted by RETOUCH Nexus case studies

The identification of innovative stakeholder engagement mechanisms documented in this handbook followed a structured, iterative process developed in close collaboration with the RETOUCH NEXUS case studies.

During the project, case studies reported on their stakeholder engagement activities through two complementary instruments: a **planning spreadsheet**, completed ahead of activities, and a **post-activity evaluation questionnaire**, completed following implementation. These tools are documented in the project deliverable D2.4 - Activities, Approaches and Guidelines for Inclusive Capacity Development in the WEFE Nexus Governance. In the planning spreadsheet, case studies are asked to indicate, for each planned engagement activity, whether the use of innovative mechanisms is foreseen and, if so, to specify which mechanisms are planned. In the post-activity questionnaire, case studies report on innovative mechanisms deployed in their activities, selecting from the following categories: *Digital platforms and tools*, *Creative communication strategies*, *Interactive workshops* and *Others*, with the option to provide additional details.

Drawing on the information reported across both instruments, innovative engagement mechanisms implemented by case studies were mapped and grouped together into the five categories in this handbook. These categories are not aimed to work as rigid classifications, but rather as an organising framework to group together in this handbook mechanisms that share common key characteristics and approaches to innovation in stakeholder engagement. A given mechanism can address more than one dimension of innovation simultaneously and could therefore fit into more than one of the categories.

A draft table was developed presenting the mechanisms implemented by case studies to be included in this handbook and their corresponding proposed categories (Table 3). This was shared with case study leaders for review, leading to adjustments as well as to the incorporation of further mechanisms. For the activities listed in the table after the review process, a questionnaire was shared with the respective case study leaders, inviting them to provide more detailed information on the implementation of the specific mechanism. The responses collected in these questionnaires and in the post-activity evaluation questionnaires informed the content of the following handbook sections.

Table 3 presents the innovative stakeholder engagement mechanisms identified across the RETOUCH NEXUS case study, their key characteristics, and the categories under which they are grouped in this handbook. Table 4 maps these categories to the potential goals and target stakeholders of engagement activities, drawing on the information provided by case studies in their post-activity questionnaires.



Table 3. Innovative stakeholder engagement mechanisms – Characteristics and examples from the RETOUCH Nexus Case Studies

Category	Characteristics	Examples from the RETOUCH Nexus Case Studies
1. Creative Communication Strategies 	✓ Use of narrative and storytelling approaches ✓ Leveraging digital and multimedia platforms ✓ Translating technical content for general audiences ✓ Creating emotional resonance with water governance issues ✓ Enabling broad dissemination beyond traditional stakeholder groups.	Podcast - RETOUCH Nexus Narratives <i>RETOUCH Nexus project</i> Online video report – Sub-case Agnetenpark Peer <i>Belgium</i>
2. Communities of Practice 	✓ Ongoing rather than one-off engagement ✓ Informal and flexible structures ✓ Focus on mutual learning and knowledge exchange ✓ Brings together diverse expertise and perspectives ✓ Builds trust and social capital over time ✓ Often includes networking and relationship-building elements.	Business Breakfast and Living Labs <i>Malta</i> Exchange with financial experts on decentral water investments <i>Belgium</i>
3. Fostering Youth Involvement 	✓ Age-appropriate and accessible methods ✓ Emphasis on experiential and interactive learning ✓ Recognition of youth as current stakeholders, not just future ones ✓ Often leverages digital tools and platforms familiar to young people ✓ Builds long-term capacity for civic engagement ✓ Creates intergenerational dialogue opportunities.	Use of GTI app by students <i>Slovakia</i> Workshop – Elementary School in Bamberg <i>Germany</i> Art research project in high-school <i>Netherlands</i>
4. Digital Tools & Platforms 	✓ Enables broader geographic participation ✓ Facilitates real-time data collection and sharing ✓ Supports visualisation of complex spatial information ✓ Can enable two-way communication between citizens and authorities ✓ Reduces barriers to participation for some stakeholders ✓ Requires attention to digital inclusion and accessibility	Indicators app - Training <i>Germany</i> RETOUCH Nexus Case Study Dashboard <i>RETOUCH Nexus project</i>
5. Interactive Learning Experiences 	✓ Promotes active engagement of stakeholders as contributors and co-creators of knowledge ✓ Utilises physical, visual and experiential elements to create memorable learning moments. ✓ Creates opportunities for collaborative problem-solving and building collective understanding. ✓ Flexible formats that adapt to different contexts. ✓ Enables participants to experience complex systems and concepts.	Interactive workshop with students: World Café Method <i>Germany</i> Waterproof Experience <i>Belgium</i> Workshop 3 – HHNK <i>Netherlands</i>



Table 4 – Categories of innovative stakeholder engagement mechanisms – Goals and target stakeholders

Category	Goals of stakeholder engagement activity	Target stakeholders
1. Creative Communication Strategies 	Focus on reaching broad audiences and translating complex information into accessible, emotionally resonant narratives. → Inform about RETOUCH Nexus project → Raise awareness among stakeholders	Ideal to reach non-expert audiences who may not respond to technical formats. → Citizens → Civil society → Associations → Specific end-users (e.g. farmers)
2. Communities of Practice 	The ongoing and trust-building nature of CoPs is ideal for fostering cooperation, collaborative problem-solving and iterative feedback loops. → Inform about RETOUCH Nexus project → Raise awareness among stakeholders	CoPs thrive when bringing together diverse expertise for sustained knowledge exchange. → Industry/business partners → Research communities → National & Regional authorities → Innovators
3. Fostering Youth Involvement 	Focus on awareness-raising and building cooperative skills through creative and age-appropriate engagement methods → Raise awareness among stakeholders → Encourage stakeholder cooperation	Target young people whilst engaging with other stakeholders that can support intergenerational dialogue. → Citizens → Civil society → Research communities → Youth
4. Digital Tools & Platforms 	Goals aligned with the strengths of digital platforms for the dissemination of information, collaborative data-collection and enabling a two-way feedback. → Inform about RETOUCH Nexus project → Close data gaps → Problem solving → Provide feedback on project results	Enable broad geographics participation for a diverse range of stakeholders → Citizens → Local authorities → Research communities → Innovators → Specific end-users (e.g. farmers)
5. Interactive Learning Experiences 	Focus on the experiential nature of engagement activities, which create memorable encounters that deepen understanding of water-related issues → Raise awareness among stakeholders → Encourage stakeholder cooperation → Inform about RETOUCH Nexus project	Broadly applicable, allow for the engagement of wide public audiences through immersive formats. → Industry/ business partners → Citizens → Civil society → Specific end-users



3 Innovative mechanisms and success factors for stakeholder engagement and public participation

3.1 Creative communication strategies



Description

Creative communication strategies

Creative communication strategies refer to innovative approaches to conveying complex information through non-traditional media formats and storytelling techniques. These strategies aim to reach **broader audiences, foster emotional connections with water-related issues, and translate technical knowledge into accessible narratives**. Using digital channels and creative storytelling, such strategies bridge the gap between technical expertise and public understanding, fostering meaningful engagement with audiences that may not typically participate in conventional stakeholder processes.



Implementation

Creative communication strategies

Successfully deploying creative communication strategies demands thoughtful planning from the outset. Understanding your target audience shapes every decision, from selecting the right format to choosing appropriate language and cultural references. Equally important is a clear assessment of available resources and expertise, since producing high-quality creative content often requires collaborations with media professionals, performers or technical specialists. Throughout the creative process, it is important to maintain reliability to the technical message behind it, ensuring the information is both accurate and accessible to different audiences. A robust dissemination strategy should be established from early on, considering how and where to share content to maximise its reach.



Know your audience

Define the stakeholders you wish to engage and tailor format, language and tone to their preferences and contexts.



Build the right team

Assess internal capacities and establish partnerships with creative professionals where needed.



Ensure message integrity

Ensure that storytelling and simplification do not compromise the accuracy of technical content.



Maximise reach and inclusion

Plan distribution channels and address potential barriers to ensure broad dissemination.





Pros & Cons

Creative communication strategies

Creative communication strategies are particularly effective for engaging broad, non-specialist audiences, such as the general public, community groups, local associations and practitioners working on the ground. These approaches also resonate strongly with younger generations, whose familiarity with digital media and storytelling formats make them receptive to strategies including podcasts, videos and creative performances. These techniques may, on the other hand, be less appropriate as a primary engagement method for policymakers, governmental bodies or high-level decision-makers as well as for academics and technical specialists, which often require more formal, evidence-based documentation.

Pros

Creative communication strategies



Broad accessibility

Makes complex technical content understandable and engaging for audiences without specialist knowledge.



Emotional resonance

Storytelling and multimedia formats foster personal connections with issues, motivating action and sustained interest.



Extended outreach

Digital platforms and creative formats enable dissemination beyond traditional stakeholder networks and geographical borders.



Memorable impact

Narrative-driven and visually engaging content is more likely to be remembered and shared.

Cons

Creative communication strategies



Risk of oversimplification

Translating technical content into accessible narratives may inadvertently omit important nuances or complexities.



Resource intensity

Producing high-quality creative content requires time, budget and specialised expertise that may not be readily available.



Limited suitability

Institutional and academic audiences may require more formal, rigorous and evidence-based formats.



Challenging for monitoring

Assessing the impacts of creative strategies in changing attitudes and behaviours can be difficult in comparison to traditional engagement metrics.



3.1.1 The RETOUCH Nexus Narratives Podcast



Implementation within RETOUCH Nexus *The RETOUCH Nexus Narratives podcast*

In early 2025, the RETOUCH Nexus project has launched a dedicated podcast series, the RETOUCH Nexus Narratives - to amplify stakeholder voices and showcase experiences from case studies across WEFE sectors. The series features interviews with local practitioners, technical experts, and community representatives from case study regions, discussing topics such as water governance, energy efficiency, sustainable agriculture, and ecosystem resilience. By aligning episode topics with project case studies, the podcast contributes to extending the reach of project themes and results, offering accessible storytelling and documenting real-world challenges and solutions in integrated resource governance. The episodes implemented by case studies in the context of the RETOUCH nexus project presented below can serve as inspiration on topics for the development and implementation of further podcasts.

Figure 1. RETOUCH NEXUS Narratives Podcast Series



RETOUCH Nexus Narratives **Podcast episodes**

Publication	Country	Topic
31.03.25	Slovakia	Water resource management from farmer's perspective
19.05.25	Slovakia	Changing climate, changing waters: Challenges in Slovakia
02.07.25	Spain	Rethinking water policy in Spain: Toward a New Water Culture
29.10.25	Malta	From Waste to Wisdom – Malta Circular Approach to the WEFE Nexus

Lessons learned from the implementation within RETOUCH NEXUS

- ✓ **Planning for consistent content delivery:** Regular publishing schedules are important to maintain the audience interest and engagement and demonstrates organisational commitment to it. Moreover, early planning and content strategy are critical to ensure cohesion and consistency across episodes
- ✓ **Pre-interview preparation for better conversations:** Providing interviewees with guiding questions and a clear episode theme in advance helps them feel comfortable and ensures that discussion stays focused, accessible and relevant to the intended audience.



- ✓ **Promoting through multiple channels:** the promotion on social media, newsletters and during in-person events contributes to expanding the podcast's reach and reinforcing engagement loops.
- ✓ **Featuring diverse stakeholder voices:** Including a variety of actors such as farmers, municipal representatives, officials from river basins, scientists and academics, NGOs, etc, contributes to building trust, legitimacy and inclusivity in the narrative.
- ✓ **Balancing expert content with storytelling:** Combining technical insights with human-centred stories or local voices helps contextualize abstract WEFE topics, enhancing understanding and retention of content.

Do It Yourself!

1.		Define your purpose	Clarify why you are creating the podcast and what you aim to achieve. Defining your purpose helps shaping the tone, format and target audience, ensuring that every episode contributes to a coherent narrative aligned with your broader goals.
2.		Plan your content	Develop a technical strategy that balances technical depth with accessibility. Map out potential themes and episodes in advance, defining on formats (interviews, panel discussions, solo podcast host) and identify potential guests.
3.		Gather your tools	Assemble the necessary equipment and software. The set does not need to be overcomplicated, but a decent microphone and headphones contribute to clear audio quality, which is key for an engaging podcast. For online interviews, it is important to ensure reliable internet connection and recording platforms.
4.		Prepare & record	Thorough preparation ensures smoother recording sessions. Therefore, it is interesting to brief interview guests on the topic to be addressed and share questions in advance. A comfortable atmosphere during the interview encourages open conversation and allows space for authentic dialogue. When recording, it is important to speak clearly, naturally and at a measured pace, trying to avoid rigid scripts.
5.		Edit thoughtfully	Editing shapes the listener experience and contributes to removing unnecessary pauses and filler words while preserving the natural flow of the conversation. Moreover, introductions, transitions and additional explanations can be added in the edition as well as music or sound cues to enhance engagement.
6.		Publish & promote	The platforms for publishing the podcast should be decided according to the target audience. Accessible platforms such as Spotify, Apple Podcasts or YouTube



7.



Measure & improve

contribute to a broad outreach. For the publication, it is important to craft compelling titles and descriptions that highlight the theme of each episode. Published episodes can be promoted through newsletters, social media, partner networks and stakeholder channels. It is interesting to keep a consistent publishing schedule in order to build listener expectations and loyalty.

Track the podcast's performance through available metrics such as download numbers, listener demographics, episode completion rates and audience feedback, reflecting on which topics generate more interest and which formats resonate with the audience. Continuous improvement allows the podcast to remain relevant, impactful and aligned with evolving stakeholders' needs.



3.1.2 Online video report – Sub-case Agnetenpark Peer



Implementation within RETOUCH Nexus

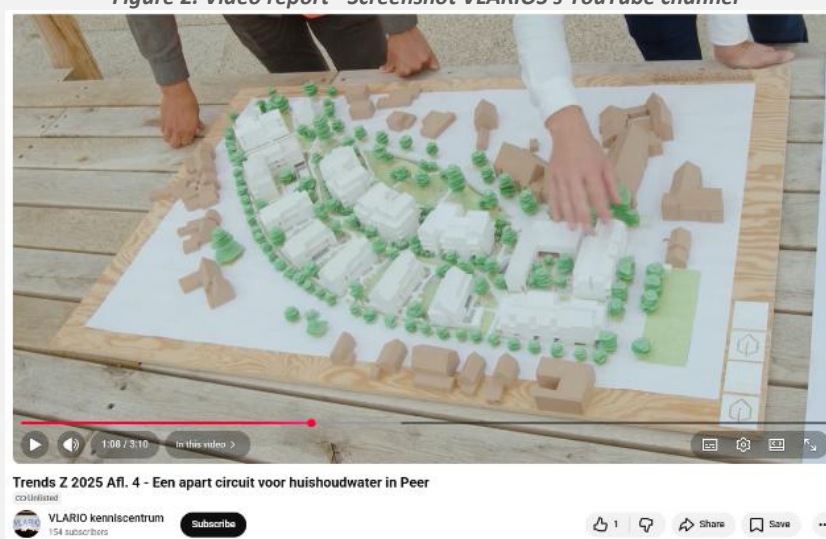
Online video report – Sub-case Agnetenpark Peer

Online video reportage is a creative communication strategy that uses short, professionally produced videos to showcase real-world projects and engage broad audiences. In the Belgian case study, De Watergroep partnered with the TV channel Trends Z to produce a 3-minute video featuring Agnetenpark – a residential park where rainwater is collectively harvested, filtered, and distributed for household use such as toilet flushing, cleaning and garden watering.

The mechanism aims to reach audiences beyond the usual stakeholders by combining visually engaging content with storytelling. Video is inherently more accessible than text-based communication, making complex sustainability topics easier to understand for citizens, including young people, as well as professionals such as project managers, architects and water users.

The production by the Belgian case study involved collaboration between De Watergroep's project and communication managers and the media partners. Planning took approximately four months, filming half a day and post-production two months. The video was broadcast on TV and shared online, reaching Trend Z's daily viewers plus additional views on the De Watergroep's website and VLARIO's YouTube channel.

Figure 2. Video report - Screenshot VLARIO's YouTube channel



Lessons learned from the implementation within RETOUCH NEXUS

- ✓ **Investing in thorough preparation and coordination:** Successful video production depends on clear communication among all parties involved: project leads, communication staff and the production team. Defining roles, agreeing on timelines and briefing interviewees in advance prevents confusion on filming day. Close coordination between De Watergroep's and the production company ensured that the half-day shoot ran smoothly.
- ✓ **Balancing scripted content with flexibility:** While it is essential to cover all key messages, overly rigid scripts can make videos feel artificial. It is important to allow interviewees some freedom to speak naturally and leave room for spontaneous moments that add authenticity, ensuring core points are prepared but remaining open to adjustments during the filming.



- ✓ **Recognising limitations:** Video content excels at raising awareness and reaching broad audiences. However, it cannot replace in-depth dialogue or interactive engagement. The video report on the Agnetenpark effectively contributed to sparking interest and working as a conversation starter and awareness tool but was not designed to enable two-way discussions. For deeper stakeholder interaction, it is important to complement the strategy with other formats.
- ✓ **Planning for resource requirements:** High-quality video production requires skills in scripting, filming and editing, or a budget to hire professionals for these tasks. It is fundamental to realistically assess internal capacities and identify potential gaps. Partnering with media channels such as Trends Z can reduce costs while ensuring professional output.

Do It Yourself!

1.		Define your storyline	Choose a clear project or topic and identify the core message you want to communicate to the audience. A focused narrative ensures the video resonates and stays concise.
2.		Select relatable voices	Identify stakeholders who can explain the project or share relatable perspectives (e.g. experts, end-users, project managers, etc). This contributes to make the content credible and to engage different audiences.
3.		Develop the script	Craft a simple script with an introduction to the topic, an informational segment and a conclusion, ensuring all key messages are covered. A clear structure guides production and keeps viewers' attention to the video along its entire duration.
4.		Coordinate production	Coordinate with relevant partners, such as media channels and production team, set the dates with interviewees and stakeholders and secure filming location in advance. A professional coordination prevents delays and ensures the quality of the output.
5.		Capture the footage	Film different shots, including landscape, interviews and practical action on location. Varied visuals make the video dynamic and illustrate the project in context. While following the script, it is important to allow for flexibility for potential on-the-spot adjustments.
6.		Edit for clarity	Work with video editors to create a concise video with broad appeal. A polished final product maximises impact and credibility. Make sure to review and approve the video before its release to the public.
7.		Disseminate the video	Distribute the video via different channels, such as TV, organisational websites, YouTube and partner networks in order to extend its reach beyond typical stakeholder groups. If possible, track viewership in different channels.



3.2 Communities of Practice



Description

Communities of Practice

Communities of Practice (CoPs) refer to groups of people who share a common concern, interest or passion for a topic and who deepen their knowledge and expertise through ongoing interaction. In the context of stakeholder engagement for sustainable water management, CoPs provide a **structured yet flexible framework for bringing together diverse actors** –such as policymakers, practitioners, researchers and private sector actors– to collaboratively learn, exchange experiences and co-develop solutions over time. Unlike one-off workshops or consultations, CoPs are characterised by their recurring nature and a relatively stable membership, which allows trust to build and discussions to evolve iteratively.



Implementation

Communities of Practice

Establishing a successful Community of Practice requires attention to both structural and relational dimensions. The recurring nature of CoPs means that organisers must plan not just for individual sessions, but for the evolution of the community over time, balancing consistency with adaptability. Key considerations include defining a shared domain of interest, cultivating trust among a stable group of participants, developing tangible outputs that demonstrate collective value and maintaining a regular rhythm of engagement that sustains momentum without overburdening members. The implementation of a CoP as a deliberate goal in itself can be challenging – within the RETOUCH Nexus project, the most meaningful communities emerged organically from ongoing activities that repeatedly brought the same constellation of actors together around shared topics. Recognising and nurturing this naturally forming communities often provided more effective than attempting to engineer their development from the outset.



Define a clear domain

Identify a specific topic or challenge that genuinely matters to all participants and can sustain long-term interest.



Cultivate the right community

Bring together a stable group with complementary expertise and ensure facilitation that builds trust and open exchange.



Develop shared practice

Create tangible outputs (e.g., case studies, recommendations, joint problem-solving) that demonstrate collective value and progress.



Ensure continuity and rhythm

Establish a regular meeting schedule that maintains momentum while remaining flexible enough to adapt to emerging needs.





Pros & Cons

Communities of Practice

Communities of Practice offer distinct advantages for stakeholder engagement, particularly where sustained dialogue and relationship-building are essential. However, they also come with limitations that make them more suitable for certain audiences and contexts than others. Understanding these trade-offs helps project teams determine when a CoP approach is the right fit, and when alternative engagement mechanisms may be more appropriate.

Pros

Communities of Practice



Deep trust-building

Recurring interactions with a stable group allow relationships to develop, fostering openness and honest exchange.



Iterative learning

Participants can refine ideas over time, building on previous discussions rather than starting from scratch each session.



Cross-sectoral bridging

CoPs are effective for connecting actors from different fields (e.g., water utilities and financial experts) who benefit from ongoing dialogue.



Practitioner ownership

Members often develop a sense of collective ownership, increasing commitment and the likelihood of real-world application.

Cons

Communities of Practice



Time-intensive commitment

The recurring nature can be demanding, risking dropout from stakeholders with limited availability.



Limited scale

CoPs work best with smaller, stable groups, making them unsuitable for broad public participation.



Risk of insularity

Without periodic refresh, CoPs can become echo chambers, limiting exposure to new perspectives.



Resource-demanding facilitation

Sustaining a CoP over time requires continuous coordination and facilitation effort, which may strain project resources.



3.2.1 Business breakfast and Living Labs



Implementation within RETOUCH Nexus *Business Breakfast and Living Labs*

The Community of Practice in Malta was structured as a series of interconnected Business Breakfast meetings and Living Labs, designed to progressively build stakeholder engagement around WEFE Nexus topics. Starting in March 2024, these recurring sessions brought together approximately 25 participants per event – including regional and local authorities, environmental NGOs, farmers' associations, the water utility company and other key stakeholders.

The Business Breakfasts were primarily informative sessions held in informal settings to facilitate interaction and encourage open contributions. They featured breakout rooms with assigned moderators, the launch of an online engagement tool (GTI app), and application of the NEXUS Ranking System to assess the NEXUS-friendliness of Malta's River Basin Management Plan. The Living Labs, by contrast, were practical, collaborative sessions where participants with technical and policy expertise worked together in groups to develop solutions and identify best practices.

A key challenge was fostering engagement among professionals who were not familiar with one another and maintaining momentum across recurring meetings with the same participants. To address this, the team implemented several strategies: inviting a radio personality to facilitate and create a dynamic atmosphere, introducing relevant and relatable topics, incorporating interactive small-group exercises and selecting accessible, convenient venues. These mechanisms proved effective in sustaining active participation throughout the series.

Community of Practice in Malta **Stakeholder engagement events**

Date	Event
08.03.2024	Business breakfast: Introducing RETOUCH to stakeholders
28 & 29.05.2024	Living Lab: Integrated stakeholder engagement workshop
11.06.2024	Business breakfast: Launch of online engagement tool
17 & 18.09.2024	Living Lab: Motivation, enhancement and awareness
15.05.2025	Business breakfast: Ongoing stakeholder engagement
09.10.2025	Business breakfast: Ongoing stakeholder engagement



Figure 3. Engagement activity – Community of Practice in Malta



Lessons learned from the implementation within RETOUCH NEXUS

- ✓ **Address practical needs of participants:** Ensure logistics such as parking, accessibility, and catering are well organised. These considerations seem secondary but can significantly affect attendance and the overall experience of participants. Removing practical barriers demonstrates that the organising team values participants' time and comfort and contributes to a more positive engagement atmosphere.
- ✓ **Keep meetings focused and time-efficient:** Senior stakeholders in particular have limited availability, and overly long or loosely structure meetings risk disengagement or declining attendance over time. Clearly indicating the specific topics to be addressed in advance – and sticking to the agenda during the session – helps participants prepare meaningfully and signals respect for their time.
- ✓ **Prioritise interactivity and an informal atmosphere:** Designing sessions around small-group exercises, open discussions, and skilled facilitation encourages broader and more authentic participation from stakeholders. While formal presentations tend to limit participation to a small number of voices, an informal tone contributes to engaging stakeholders who may feel less confident in structured and hierarchical settings.
- ✓ **Vary engagement mechanisms across sessions:** When the same group of stakeholder meets repeatedly, using the same formats risks monotony and declining motivation. Introducing different tools and methods across sessions – such as ranking exercises, digital apps, or breakout group formats – sustains interest and ensures that different types of participants can contribute in ways that suit them.

Do It Yourself!

1.		Identify the topics	Define the agenda items and key themes to be addressed across the series of meetings, ensuring relevance to participants' interests and responsibilities.
2.		Identify the stakeholders	Compile a comprehensive stakeholder list covering all relevant sectors – authorities, associations, utilities, academia, NGOs and others.
3.		Know your stakeholders	Understand their backgrounds, expertise levels and practical constraints (e.g., availability, seniority, accessibility needs) to tailor the format and logistics accordingly.



4.		Invite the stakeholders	Send clear invitations specifying topics, duration and venue – emphasise the interactive nature and practical value of participation.
5.		Design for engagement	Plan interactive elements such as breakout sessions, facilitation by a dynamic moderator and hands-on exercises to foster collaboration and dialogue.
6.		Ensure practical arrangements	Select accessible venues and address logistical needs (parking, catering, timing) to maximise attendance and comfort.
7.		Maintain momentum across sessions	Build each meeting on the previous one, introduce new tools or topics to sustain interest and keep participants informed of progress and outcomes.



3.2.2 Exchange with financial experts on water investments



Implementation within RETOUCH Nexus

Exchange with financial experts on water investments

This Community of Practice brought together VITO researchers and representatives from the Belgian banking sector to explore financing mechanisms for decentralised collective water infrastructure. The initiative emerged from VITO's ongoing research on business models for water investments and the recognition that early engagement with financial institutions is essential for project viability. In September 2025, a two-hour session was held in Brussels and online, facilitated by Febelfin (the Belgian federation of banks), with 15 participants representing four different banks. VITO prepared a presentation with concrete cases to illustrate the importance of decentralised water infrastructure, which sparked substantive discussion – bankers raised concrete questions and offered practical suggestions. The session resulted in an action plan, with plans for follow-up meetings to share main conclusions and extend the approach to other sectors such as insurers.

Lessons learned from the implementation within RETOUCH NEXUS

- ✓ **Consider the right moment to involve financial stakeholders:** Engaging banks from the start of a project helps ensure the project design remains aligned with financing requirements and is considered bankable from the start. Early involvement allows financial institutions to flag requirements and constraints in time for them to be meaningfully integrated to the project structure.
- ✓ **Ground discussions in the needs and logic of financial stakeholders:** Financial institutions engage more constructively when presented with specific, clearly scoped proposals. A well-defined project with clear objectives, timelines, and expected outcomes gives banks the information they need to assess feasibility and consider financing options.
- ✓ **Work through intermediary organisations to build the community:** Sector federations and umbrella organisations, such as Febelfin in the Belgian context, can play a pivotal role in convening financial stakeholders and lending credibility to a Community of Practice. Organising through established intermediaries lowers the barrier to participation and ensures that the right people within financial institutions are reached efficiently.

Do It Yourself!

1.



Start from a concrete problem

Identify a specific challenge you need input on e.g., "How can we improve financing conditions for decentralised collective water investments?"

2.



Engage one stakeholder group at a time

Rather than convening all actors at once, focus on one sector per engagement cycle (e.g., start with bankers, then move to insurers) to allow for tailored, in-depth discussions.

3.



Work through sector federations

Contact the relevant umbrella organisation for your target sector — they can guide you to the right contacts and may facilitate the meeting on your behalf.



4.



Maintain ongoing relationships

Keep contacts warm after initial meetings by providing regular updates on project progress and returning with conclusions — this builds a lasting resource you can consult when questions arise.



3.3 Fostering Youth Involvement



Description

Fostering Youth Involvement

Methods for **Fostering Youth Involvement** are engagement strategies specifically designed to include young people –from school children to young adults– in discussions, learning processes and decision-making related to sustainability challenges. Crucially, these approaches recognise young people not merely as future stakeholders but as current contributors with unique perspectives, digital literacy and long-term stakes in sustainable water management outcomes. Involving youth builds awareness and capacity, brings fresh perspectives and creative ideas into current debates and strengthens intergenerational equity by giving younger generations a voice in issues that will shape their futures. Youth engagement can take many forms, from educational activities in schools to participatory research with university students, often leveraging digital tools and platforms familiar to young people. However, effective approaches must be tailored to the developmental stage, interests and capacities of the target age group – what works for elementary school pupils will differ significantly from what resonates with university students.



Implementation

Fostering Youth Involvement

Implementing youth engagement requires a deliberate approach that accounts for the specific characteristics of the age group involved. Across all ages, experiential and interactive learning methods tend to resonate more than passive, lecture-based formats. Younger children benefit from hands-on, playful and visually engaging activities, while university students can engage with more complex, research-oriented or professionally relevant formats, often through digital platforms they already use. Successful youth involvement depends on creating safe spaces for participation, using age-appropriate language and methods and ensuring that young people see their contributions valued and reflected in outcomes. As part of the implementation of youth engagement activities within RETOUCH NEXUS, dedicated templates were developed to support the responsible involvement of school children, including data collection forms, parental consent forms, and data protection protocols compliant with GDPR requirements providing a practical safeguarding framework that other projects can adapt when engaging minors in stakeholder processes.



Tailor methods to developmental stage

Use playful, visual and experiential activities for younger children; offer intellectually challenging, career-relevant or research-based formats for university students.



Leverage digital tools and platforms

Meet young people where they are by integrating social media, interactive apps or online collaboration tools that feel familiar and accessible.



Use accessible language and framing

Avoid jargon and abstract concepts, especially with younger audiences; frame topics in ways that connect to their daily lives and interests.



Create space for intergenerational dialogue

Design activities that bring youth together with older stakeholders, enabling mutual learning and ensuring young voices are heard.





Pros & Cons

Fostering Youth Involvement

Engaging young people in sustainability initiatives offers unique opportunities but also presents specific challenges. Youth audiences can bring enthusiasm, creativity and long-term perspective to a project, yet they also require adapted approaches and may have limited influence on immediate decision-making processes. The suitability of youth engagement depends on the project's goals, timeline and willingness to invest in age-appropriate, interactive design.

Pros

Fostering Youth Involvement



Fresh perspectives and creativity

Young people often approach problems with fewer assumptions, offering innovative ideas and unconventional solutions.



Long-term capacity building

Engaging youth builds awareness and skills, creating lasting impact and a foundation for continued engagement beyond the project's lifespan.



High enthusiasm and energy

Younger participants often bring genuine curiosity, energy and familiarity with digital tools that can enrich engagement processes.



Intergenerational legitimacy

Including youth creates opportunities for mutual learning across generations and strengthens the democratic legitimacy of sustainability initiatives.

Cons

Fostering Youth Involvement



Indirect pathway to impact

Young people's contributions often feed into longer-term awareness and culture change rather than immediate project decisions or policy shifts.



Resource-intensive adaptation

Designing age-appropriate materials and activities requires additional time, creativity and often specialised expertise.



Logistical constraints

School schedules, parental consent requirements and institutional gatekeepers can complicate planning and access.



Risk of tokenism

If not carefully designed, youth engagement can become symbolic rather than substantive, leading to disillusionment among participants.



3.3.1 Use of GTI app by students



Implementation within RETOUCH Nexus

Use of GTI app by students

As part of its stakeholder engagement strategy, the Slovak case study explored the use of the GTI app as a digital communication and information-sharing platform, engaging students as the primary participants. The GTI app offer a structured online environment where users can exchange messages, share documents, and contribute to thematic forums. The Slovak University of Agriculture (SUA) identified this tool as an opportunity to engage PhD students, building their familiarity with digital engagement platforms used in professional and research contexts while providing feedback for improvements in the application.

The activity was preceded by a structure preparation phase led by two members of the SUA team. Over a period of approximately three months, the team conducted internal testing, held online consultations with GTI and EWA – partners responsible for the app development – and assessed its functions, login procedures and technical requirements. This groundwork ensured that students were introduced to a platform that had already been evaluated internally, and that the tasks assigned to them were feasible and meaningful. The idea emerged from the collaboration between the Slovak and the Maltese case study – which has long experience working with the tool – illustrating how peer exchange between case studies can open new pathways for engagement and further improvements of products developed within the project.

Student testing began in May 2025. Participants were instructed to register on the platform, join the Slovak Case Study Forum, test its communication functions, send at least three messages based on a selected document, and upload an article with a photo to the library section. Students completed their tasks on time and provided detailed feedback, identifying significant usability issues across both desktop and mobile versions, including registration difficulties, interface scaling errors, limited forum functionality, and lack of PDF upload support. Their structured involvement proved very important: based on the testing exercise, the team identified potential to improve the app's user-friendliness for broader stakeholder rollout.

Lessons learned from the implementation within RETOUCH NEXUS

- ✓ **Students are credible and effective evaluators of digital tools:** young audiences, particularly those with research background, bring digital literacy and a critical perspective that makes them well-suited to test new platforms. In the exercise, PhD students identified concrete usability barriers across different devices, producing actionable insights to shape strategic decisions about the application.
- ✓ **Structured tasks yield more useful feedback:** Assigning specific, measurable activities – such as posting a minimum number of messages or uploading content – ensures that student feedback is grounded in real experience rather than general impressions. A clear task framework contributes to enable comparable, detailed responses across participants.

Do It Yourself!

1.



Define the learning objective

Clarify what is expected from the engagement of students in terms of experiencing, testing and contributing with their engagement with the digital tool. A clear objective ensures that the student activity is purposeful and aligned with broader educational goals as well as relevant for the collection of actionable feedback.



This project has received funding from the European Union's Horizon Europe research and innovation programme under grant agreement N° 101086522.



2.		Internally evaluate the tool before the activity	Test the digital platform with a small internal team before involving students. Assess user-friendliness, cross-device compatibility, registration processes and core functions, ensuring that students are not confronted with avoidable technical barriers that undermine the activity. Consult partner organisations with prior experience where possible.
3.		Design a structured student activity	Define clear, specific tasks for participants which produce comparable and grounded feedback and make students' contribution meaningful rather than exploratory. Prepare written instructions to ensure that students know what is expected from them.
4.		Brief and onboard participants	Introduce students to the tool's purpose and functions before the activity begins. Provide step-by-step registration guidance and a point of contact for technical questions.
5.		Collect feedback	Allow students sufficient time to complete their tasks and gather structured feedback through surveys or interviews covering usability, functionality and overall user experience. Systematic feedback collection ensures that evaluation procedures produce evidence that can inform strategic decisions on broader rollout.
6.		Analyse results and decide	After the activity, review students' feedback and weigh usability, added value, and resource requirements against the original objectives. Make evidence-based decisions on which functionalities of the tool must be adapted.
7.		Communicate outcomes to participants	Share the results of the activity and evaluation with the students involved, acknowledging their contribution. Closing the feedback loop fosters a sense of ownership and reinforces the value of youth involvement in project decision-making.



3.3.2 Workshop in Elementary School



Implementation within RETOUCH Nexus *Workshop in elementary school*

Engaging children in sustainability topics at an early age can be a powerful strategy for building long-term environmental awareness and fostering a sense of responsibility towards natural resources. The German case study implemented an interactive in-person workshop at an elementary school in Bamberg, Germany, in December 2025, bringing together 17 children aged 7-9 for a three-hour session on water quality and quantity. The workshop was organised by contacting elementary schools within the case study region and collaborating with those that expressed interest in participating.

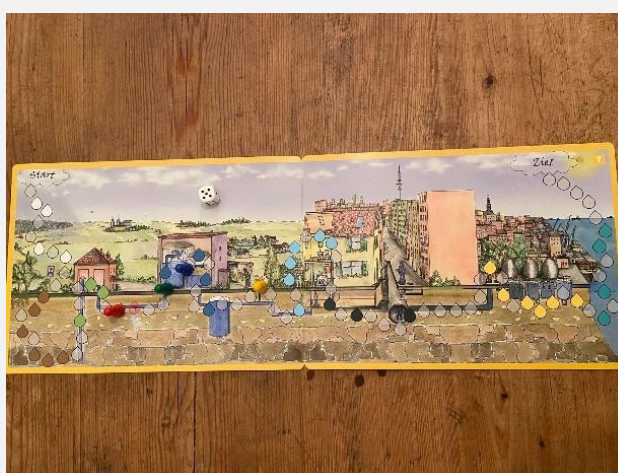
The session introduced children to key water-related concepts through age-appropriate, interactive activities. Participants explored the notion of virtual water and calculated their own daily water demand, making abstract concepts personally relevant and tangible. Rather than relying on lectures, the workshop employed hands-on exercises to make children internalise key messages, such as that the access to clean tap water is not guaranteed for everyone on the planet, and that water is a precious resource that should not be wasted.

The activity was design with a dual goal of raising awareness and applying creative engagement strategies suited to a young audience. By grounding the learning experience in children's everyday lives and fostering personal reflection on water use, the workshop demonstrated the importance of thoughtful pedagogy and communication to meet young people where they are and reach stakeholder engagement beyond the usual professional and institutional audiences.

Figure 4. Calculation of daily water consumption

Activity	Frequency	Consumption per unit	Total Consumption
Lehneputzen	2mal	1 Liter	2 Liter
Baden	1mal	150 Liter	150 Liter
Braten	1mal	50 Liter	50 Liter
Trinken	1mal	2,5 Liter	2,5 Liter
Kindersachen	1mal	2,5 Liter	2,5 Liter
Handwaschen	1mal	2,5 Liter	2,5 Liter
Wäsche waschen	1mal	12,5 Liter	12,5 Liter
Summe			175 Liter

Figure 5. Board game activity



Lessons learned from the implementation within RETOUCH NEXUS

- ✓ **Hands-on activities make abstract concepts accessible to young learners:** Children engage most effectively when they can directly experience and relate to the topic at hand. Having participants calculate their own daily water demand transformed an otherwise abstract concept into a personally meaningful exercise. When designing workshops for young audiences, prioritising



interactive, calculation-based or creative activities over presentations significantly increases comprehension and retention of key messages.

- ✓ **Ground key messages in relatable contrasts:** Starting from what children already know – such as their daily access to clean tap water – and contrasting it with the reality that this is not universal for everyone proved an effective way to build genuine understanding of why water conservation matters. Framing sustainability topics around contrasts that are emotionally resonant and age-appropriate help young participants connect global challenges to their own lives and behaviours.
- ✓ **Work with responsive schools:** Reaching out to multiple schools and collaborating with those that show interest ensures smoother planning and genuine engagement.

Do It Yourself!

1.		Identify and contact local schools	Reach out to elementary schools in your area or case study region via email or through local education networks. Focus collaboration on schools that respond positively and show interest in sustainability topics. Working with motivated schools ensures smoother planning and a more engaged group of participants from the outset.
2.		Design age-appropriate learning objectives	Identify two or three core messages you want children to take away from the session. Ensure objectives are simple, concrete, and emotionally resonant for the target age group. A focused set of objectives keeps the workshop coherent and increases the likelihood that children will retain the key messages after the session.
3.		Focus on a few key messages	Develop activities suited to the developmental stage of participants, such as personal calculations, visual aids, role-play or group challenges. Avoid lecture-based formats and prioritise active participation throughout. Hands-on activities contribute to making abstract concepts tangible for children and significantly improve engagement and comprehension.
4.		Connect concepts to children's daily lives	Frame water topics in ways children can relate to, such as their own water use at home, the food they eat, or their local environment. Use familiar references as entry points into broader sustainability concepts.
5.		Facilitate the session with flexibility	During the session, allow space for questions, spontaneous reactions, and children's own observations. Flexibility in delivery encourages genuine participation and enhances the quality of the experience.
6.		Plan for continued engagement	Consider follow-up activities such as a return visit, a small project the children can work on, or providing teachers with materials to continue the conversation in class. Embedding the learning into ongoing school activities or homework tasks strengthens retention and extends the reach of the engagement.



3.3.3 Art-Research Project in High School



Implementation within RETOUCH Nexus *Art-Research Project in High School*

This activity engaged 250 second-year high school students in Utrecht in a creative, research-based project exploring water's interconnections with food, energy and ecosystems through the lens of the WEFE Nexus. The objective was to make the often-invisible aspects of water visible by having students research, personalise and communicate water-related themes through the medium of infographics. The approach was developed in collaboration with a high school teacher, embedded within the school's existing programme and ran over approximately six weeks from February to mid-March.

The activity was introduced through an assignment video developed by the case study leader, shown across all participating classes to explain the theme, objectives, and approach. Teachers then guided students through a research and design process over several weeks, encouraging them to make the topic personally meaningful, even emotionally resonant. The project culminated in an exhibition where students presented their work to peers, teachers, and visitors including caregivers, with a prize awarded anonymously by fellow students and visitors. This format not only deepened students' understanding of water scarcity and its everyday relevance, but also activated them as communicators, sharing knowledge with a wider audience beyond the classroom.

Lessons learned from the implementation within RETOUCH NEXUS

- ✓ **Students connect deeply with water and climate issues:** When given creative freedom to personalise the topic, students engage meaningfully and produce work that reflects genuine understanding and emotional investment.
- ✓ **Prioritise substance over production quality:** Investing too much time in perfecting the assignment video can delay the project; a clear and functional video is sufficient to set students on the right track.
- ✓ **Build connections to the broader research context:** Finding ways to link student work to the RETOUCH project partners and the research institute would strengthen the activity's relevance and create opportunities for mutual learning.

Do It Yourself!

- | | | | |
|----|--|---|---|
| 1. | | Know your audience before designing the assignment | Tailor the topic, format, and level of complexity to the specific age group and educational context – what works for high school students may need adaptation for other groups. |
| 2. | | Develop a clear and accessible assignment | Create a structured brief (e.g. an assignment video) that explains the theme, objectives and expected output in a way that is engaging and self-explanatory for both students and teachers. |
| 3. | | Embed the activity in an existing programme | Collaborate with teachers or coordinators to integrate the assignment into the school's schedule – this reduces barriers to participation and ensures sufficient time for the creative process. |



4.		Involve youth through artmaking	Use creative formats such as infographics, posters, or visual storytelling to allow participants to embody and personalise complex issues in a fun and effective way.
5.		Organise a public showcase	Plan an exhibition or presentation event where participants can share their work with peers, family and visitors – this amplifies the reach of the engagement and rewards participants' efforts.
6.		Replicate and adapt the format	The assignment video and exhibition concept are designed to be replicable; adapt the theme and framing to fit other projects, case studies, or target groups as needed.



3.4 Digital Tools and Platforms



Description

Digital tools and platforms

Digital tools and platforms refer to web-based or software applications, interactive dashboards, and online environments that support stakeholder engagement and participatory governance by making complex data accessible, visible, and actionable. In the context of the WEFE Nexus, they serve as a critical bridge between technical analysis and policy practice — enabling policymakers, water authorities and practitioners to visualise multi-dimensional governance data, explore trade-offs and monitor progress in an intuitive and interactive way.

These tools can take different forms, from interactive dashboards that consolidate and present information across different contexts, to specialised applications that support monitoring, analysis and evidence-based decision-making. They share the common ambition to make complex, multi-dimensional information navigable and meaningful for diverse audiences, including those without a technical background. By centralising data and making it visually accessible, digital platforms support knowledge exchange, situational awareness and informed dialogue among stakeholders.

The effectiveness of digital tools is contingent on the degree to which they are embedded within deliberate and sustained engagement strategies. Well-designed platforms that lack adequate promotion, structured onboarding, and technical support may not realise its full potential as an engagement instrument. Capacity building, targeted training and continuous maintenance are therefore essential components to the technical design of digital tools, ensuring that platforms serve as enablers of stakeholder participation.



Implementation

Digital tools and platforms

The implementation of digital tools and platforms requires a deliberate approach that accounts for both technical requirements and the needs and capacities of intended users. Across different contexts, tools that purpose-built around clearly identified stakeholder needs – whether supporting analytical capacity building or enabling comparative knowledge exchange - tend to drive higher uptake and more meaningful engagement. This depends on adequate preparation, encompassing technical testing, content validation and the development of clear user guidance, while also requires attention to usability, ensuring the tool is accessible and functional across different devices and levels of digital literacy. Early engagement of potential users can contribute to identify needs, shape workflows and inform how the tool can be introduced and applied in practice.



Know your audience and purpose

Identify who will use the tool and for what purpose, considering their roles, technical capacities and specific needs to ensure the tool responds to real use cases.



Invest in capacity building

Structured training and onboarding activities ensure users can navigate the tool confidently and extract meaningful insights from the information.



Ensure accessibility and usability

The tool or platform should be intuitive, cross-device compatible, and accessible to users with varying levels of digital literacy, avoiding technical barriers.



Plan for sustainability and maintenance

Plan from the outset for ongoing updates, technical support and moderation, and establish regular feedback mechanisms to keep the tool responsive to user needs.





Pros & Cons

Digital tools and platforms

Pros

Digital tools and platforms



Enhanced accessibility and reach

Digital tools can be accessed by a wide range of stakeholders across geographies and institutional contexts, lowering barriers to participation and enabling engagement beyond traditional in-person formats.



Interactive and user-drive exploration

Well-designed platforms allow users to navigate and interact with complex information at their own pace and according to their specific interests, fostering deeper engagement.



Capacity building and knowledge transfer

Tools such as indicators applications support users in developing analytical skills and building confidence in working with governance data, contributing to long-term capacity building.



Comparative and evidence-based dialogue

By consolidating and visualising data across multiple contexts, digital tools facilitate learning and support more informed, evidence-based dialogue among stakeholders.

Cons

Digital tools and platforms



Digital literacy and access barriers

Not all stakeholders possess the technical skills or infrastructure needed to engage with digital tools effectively. Unequal access to devices, reliable internet connectivity and varying levels of digital literacy can be obstacles to engagement with these tools.



High upfront investment

The development of a functional, user-friendly digital tool requires significant investment in design, development and testing, which can be a challenge for projects with limited budgets and timelines.



Risk of low adoption and underuse

Without deliberate efforts to embed the tool into existing workflows through adequate onboarding and promoting, the uptake of digital tools can be lower than expected.



Maintenance and obsolescence

Digital tools require continuous technical support, content updates and moderation to remain functional and relevant, avoiding that tools become outdated, lose credibility or stop functioning.



3.4.1 Training on water governance monitoring indicators app

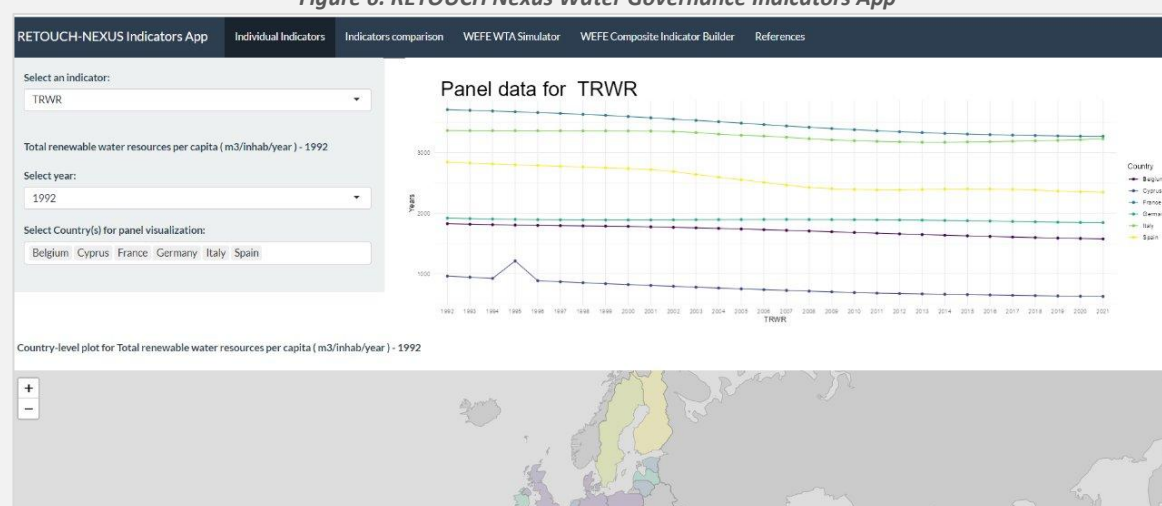


Implementation within RETOUCH Nexus

Water governance monitoring indicators application

Improving integrated water management relies on the application of monitoring frameworks capable of capturing all the relevant dimensions of water governance. Developed within the RETOUCH Nexus project, the Water Governance Monitoring Framework allows for assessing water availability and water management from an integrated. The indicators included in the framework support formal and informal institutions managing water resources improving e.g. water allocation, water-related benefits distribution, and water quality monitoring, among others. To support that, the application developed within the project may be used by policymakers and practitioners to work with these indicators in different manners, individually and in combination with each other – to monitor and evaluate how specific water governance arrangements

Figure 6. RETOUCH Nexus Water Governance Indicators App



Two training activities were conducted by the team of the Technical University Munich (TUM) responsible for the development of the application with support from adelphi Research with the goal of introducing the RETOUCH Nexus Governance Monitoring framework through a practical exercise demonstrating the potential uses of the application by water governance practitioners. The recurring nature of the training sessions and the shared interest of participating stakeholders around the analytical tool can lay the groundwork for a Community of Practice to emerge organically from the implementation of these activities.

Training activities

Water governance monitoring indicators application

Date	Duration	Location	Participants	Type of participants
08.04.2025	1h30	Dresden Nexus Conference Dresden, Germany	35	- Academia - Practitioners
24.09.2025	45 min	Meeting with HHNK Heerhugowaard, Netherlands	17	Regional authorities



During the first training at the Dresden Nexus Conference, the Water Governance Monitoring Framework and its indicators set was introduced, followed by a live demonstration of the app's four core functions: benchmarking across space and time, exploring trade-offs through correlations, assessing water stress, and building custom composite indicators. Participants then applied the app in small groups using country-specific case studies from the RETOUCH Nexus project. At the end of the session, a discussion was conducted with participants and further feedback was collected via Mentimeter.

A follow-up session was conducted at HHNK during the RETOUCH Nexus General Assembly in Amsterdam built on the Dresden experience but adapted to the audience and the available time. Rather than demonstrating all features of the application, the session focused on a streamlined hands-on and shared workflow: participants downloaded a prepared dataset, uploaded it to the app, built a composite indicator reflecting agreed priorities and interpreted the results.

Lessons learned from the implementation within RETOUCH NEXUS

- ✓ **Providing clear methodological explanations:** Users benefit from understanding the rationale behind indicators definitions, normalisation choices and weighting methodologies. Embedding guidance within the tool or providing supporting documentation enhances user confidence and correct interpretation of the application functionalities.
- ✓ **Adapting session depth to available time:** Comprehensive demonstrations work well when time allows; when constrained, focusing on single hands-on workflow prevents rushed exercises and contributes for participants to leave the training with practical skills on the application's use.
- ✓ **Using realistic, context-specific examples:** Exercises based on familiar contexts or real data increase engagement and help participants see how the tool applies to their own work.

Do It Yourself!

1.		Clarify your trainings goals	Determine what participants should be able to do after the training session on the tool - e.g. navigate the application, input data, interpret outputs, etc. – in alignment with your project or organisational objectives.
2.		Design the learning journey	Structure the session into logical modules, including, for instance, an introduction, a presentation on core features of the tool, practical exercises and time for questions and discussion. In preparing the agenda, decide on the timing of each module and balance between presentation and hands-on work to keep participants engaged and progressively build skills.
3.		Assemble the necessary resources and data	Collect sample datasets, user guides, login credentials and any necessary supporting documentation in order to prevent technical delays and allow for realistic practice scenarios. Ensure the tool or application is accessible for all participants in the session.
4.		Test everything beforehand	Before the training, run through the full session yourself, checking the app functionalities and its application to the proposed case studies or data sets. Identify potential



5.		Facilitate interactive learning	technical issues and backup options that avoid disruptions to the training.
6.		Distribute materials and connect learners	During the training, guide participants clearly through the exercise, encourage questions, and adapt the pace to the group's level. Active participation improves knowledge retention and confidence with the tool.
7.		Gather feedback and improve	After the training, share materials such as slides, recordings, guidelines and links to communities of practice on the topic or support channels in order to enable continued learning and peer support after the session.
			Short surveys or verbal feedback can be used to assess what worked and what did not in order to drive continuous improvement and demonstrate impact. Documentation of gathered feedback and lessons learned contributes to shaping future trainings.



3.4.2 RETOUCH Nexus Dashboard



Implementation within RETOUCH Nexus

RETOUCH Nexus Dashboard

The data gathered across the six case studies and synthesised in the dashboard offers a valuable comparative lens for understanding how water governance systems interact with WEFE Nexus dynamics in practice. The governance structures table reveals that, while horizontal coordination mechanisms are present across all case studies, vertical coordination varies significantly reflecting the degree to which decision-making power is shared across national, regional, and local levels. This variation directly shapes how cross-sectoral WEFE trade-offs are managed, as more centralised systems may struggle to account for local resource realities, while more decentralised ones face challenges in ensuring policy coherence. The challenges table shows that, despite all six case studies having measures in place for water scarcity and precaution, integration of the WEFE Nexus into water governance remains uneven. Institutional capacity both personal and financial varies considerably, with several case studies flagging structural funding gaps or the need for institutional reform as barriers to more integrated governance.

The data and evaluation table highlights a further systemic challenge: although all case studies operate within legislative frameworks for water policy monitoring and evaluation, access to comprehensive, comparable, and publicly available data remains limited in most contexts, with fragmented sources, temporal gaps, and incomplete digital infrastructure constraining evidence-based decision-making. Taken together, these findings make a compelling case for the kind of structured, participatory, and digitally supported governance approaches that RETOUCH Nexus has been developing demonstrating that closing the gaps between policy frameworks, institutional capacities, and data systems is essential to achieving resilient WEFE Nexus governance across EU water contexts.

Figure 7. RETOUCH Nexus – Case Studies Dashboard

Case Studies	Coordination Mechanisms		Water Policy Setting		Implementing Institutions			
	Vertical Coordination	Horizontal Coordination	National Government	Regional Government	National Authorities	Regional Authorities	Municipalities	River Basin Managers
SPAIN Júcar River Basin	✓ Top-down	✓	✓ METDC	✓ Valencia, Castilla-La Mancha	✓ NWA	✓	✓	✓
NETHERLANDS North Holland	✓ Bottom-up	✓	✓ MIWM	✓ North Holland	✓ RWS	✓	✓	✓
SLOVAKIA South-Western Slovakia	✓ Top-down	✓	✓ ME	✗	✓ SWME	✗	✓	✓
BELGIUM Flanders	✗	✓	✗	✓ Flanders	✗	✓ CIW	✓	✓
GERMANY Upper Main District	✓ Top-down	✓	✓ Federal Government	✓ Bavaria: MECP	✗	✓ SOE	✓	✓
MALTA Malta River Basin	✗	✓	✓ MEEE	✗	✓ ERA	✓	✗	✗ (basin = the whole country)

The RETOUCH Nexus Case Study Dashboard is an interactive, web-based tool hosted on the project website that provides an accessible overview of the water governance systems across the six RETOUCH Nexus case studies. Through a user-driven, button-based navigation, visitors can explore three key dimensions of water governance for each case study:

- **Water governance structures** - the institutional and regulatory arrangements shaping water management



- **Main challenges to sustainable water governance** including water scarcity, climate pressures, sectoral competition, and governance gaps
- **Data and evaluation of water policies** is evidence for monitoring approaches underpinning governance decisions

By consolidating this comparative, cross-case information in a single interactive interface, the dashboard supports knowledge exchange, situational awareness, and informed dialogue among EU water governance stakeholders.

Lessons learned from the implementation within RETOUCH NEXUS

- ✓ **Simple design supports broader engagement:** A user-driven, button-based navigation structure with no login requirements or specialist software lowers barriers to access and ensures the dashboard can be used by a wide range of stakeholders, from policymakers to practitioners and civil society. Prioritising intuitive design over technical complexity contributes to maximising reach and usability.
- ✓ **Comparative framing enhances learning:** Consolidating governance information across multiple case studies within a single interface enables stakeholders to identify patterns, contrasts and share challenges. Structuring content around consistent governance dimensions facilitates meaningful cross-case comparisons and supports more informed dialogue.
- ✓ **Embedding the tool in engagement activities to maximise its impact:** The value of the dashboard functions can be amplified if used in workshops, events and stakeholder meetings. The use of the dashboard as reference point in in-person sessions can contribute to translating comparative insights into concrete dialogue.

Do It Yourself!

1.		Define your governance scope and case studies	Determine which governance contexts, sectors, and case studies the dashboard should cover. Clarify the key dimensions to be communicated such as governance structures, main challenges, and data and evaluation approaches and ensure these are agreed upon by the project team before content development begins.
2.		Gather and synthesise governance information	Collect relevant, up-to-date information on the water governance systems of each case study. This includes institutional arrangements, key challenges (e.g. water scarcity, climate risks, sectoral competition), and available data or policy evaluation frameworks. Ensure information is validated with local partners and case study leads.
3.		Design the interactive structure	Decide on the navigation logic of the dashboard, for example, button-based navigation per case study and per governance dimension. Keep the interface intuitive and user-friendly, ensuring that non-technical users can access and understand the content without prior expertise.
4.		Develop the content in accessible language	Write concise, plain-language summaries for each governance dimension and case study. Avoid technical jargon where possible and tailor the level of detail to a



			broad audience including policymakers, practitioners, and civil society.
5.		Embed the dashboard on a publicly accessible platform	Host the dashboard on a project website or open platform that requires no login or specialist software. Ensure it is mobile-friendly and accessible across devices and browsers to maximise reach.
6.		Promote the dashboard through engagement activities	Actively share the dashboard with stakeholders through newsletters, social media, workshops, and project events. Use it as a reference point in in-person sessions to drive traffic and familiarise stakeholders with the tool.
7.		Keep content current and gather feedback	Plan for regular content updates as governance contexts evolve. Collect user feedback for example through short online surveys to assess usability and relevance and use this to continuously improve the dashboard.



3.5 Interactive Learning Experiences



Description

Interactive Learning Experiences

Interactive learning experiences refer to mechanisms that move beyond traditional presentation-based formats to create spaces for **active participation, collaborative exploration and experiential understanding**. These approaches include both structured dialogue processes –where facilitation techniques enable meaningful exchange among diverse stakeholders– and immersive, sensory-rich environments where participants can directly experience water-related challenges and solutions. Whether through hands-on workshops, physical installations or creative simulations, these methods foster memorable encounters that engage multiple senses, **stimulate collective problem-solving and build shared understanding** among participants with different backgrounds and expertise levels.



Implementation

Interactive Learning Experiences

Implementing interactive learning experiences requires careful design that balances structure with openness for emergent insights. Whether organising a facilitated dialogue workshop or an immersive installation, success depends on creating an environment where participants feel invited to engage actively rather than passively receive information. The format should match the learning objectives: structured dialogue methods work well for harvesting diverse perspectives and building consensus, while sensory-rich installations excel at making abstract concepts tangible and emotionally resonant.



Match format to objectives

Choose facilitated dialogue methods when seeking to harvest diverse perspectives and immersive approaches when aiming to make complex systems tangible.



Design for active participation

Structure activities so that participants contribute as co-creators of knowledge, not just recipients; use prompts, hands-on elements or rotating group formats.



Prepare the physical environment

Whether a workshop room or a mobile container, the space should support the intended experience and reinforce learning objectives.



Facilitate for inclusion

Skilled facilitation ensures diverse voices are heard, manages group dynamics, and creates psychological safety for open exchange across different expertise levels and backgrounds.





Pros & Cons

Interactive Learning Experiences

Interactive learning experiences offer powerful ways to engage stakeholders beyond conventional formats, making complex topics accessible and fostering genuine collaboration. However, they also require significant preparation and may not suit all audiences or contexts equally well. Understanding these trade-offs helps determine when an interactive or immersive approach adds value, and when simpler formats may be more appropriate.

Pros

Interactive Learning Experiences



Memorable and engaging

Multi-sensory and participatory formats create lasting impressions that stay with participants far longer than traditional presentations.



Bridges expertise gaps

Experiential and visual elements help make complex water-related concepts accessible to participants without technical backgrounds.



Fosters co-creation

Active participation positions stakeholders as contributors, increasing ownership and buy-in for outcomes and solutions.



Adaptable to diverse contexts

Formats can be tailored to different group sizes, settings, and objectives, from small expert workshops to public installations.

Cons

Interactive Learning Experiences



Resource and preparation intensive

Designing and delivering interactive or immersive experiences requires significant time, materials and often specialised expertise.



Dependent on skilled facilitation

Without experienced facilitators, group dynamics can become unbalanced, or discussions may lack depth and focus.



Logistical complexity

Physical installations or hands-on activities require suitable venues, equipment and sometimes transport, adding planning challenges.



Variable depth of engagement

Some participants may engage superficially with experiential elements without translating the experience into deeper understanding or action.



3.5.1. Interactive workshop with students: World Café Method



Implementation within RETOUCH Nexus *Interactive workshop: World Café Method*

This activity combined the World Café method with role-playing to engage international Master students in a discussion on water abstraction fees in the Upper Main catchment. Held in February 2025 at the Technical University of Munich (TUM), the three-hour session was embedded in the interdisciplinary course "Integrated Land and Water Management," which links land administration, landscape planning and water management to the Water-Energy-Food-Ecosystem (WEFE) Nexus and the Sustainable Development Goals.

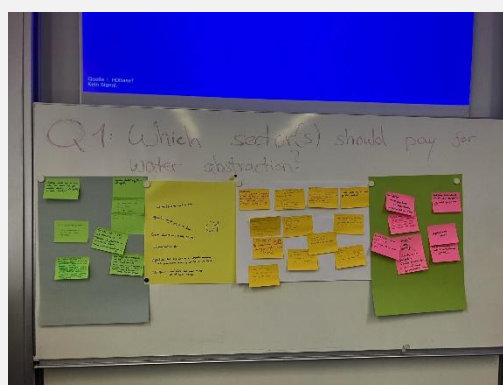
The World Café is a structured conversational method designed to mimic the informal, generative atmosphere of a café discussion. Participants sit at small tables (four to five people each) and discuss the same questions in successive rounds, with group members rotating between tables. This format enables effective, constructive dialogue, helps uncover patterns and connections and supports the identification of common goals and strategies, all with relatively modest facilitation effort.

Before the café rounds began, students were assigned stakeholder roles (Fishery, Forestry, Agriculture, Nature Conservation, Industry, Hydro Power Plant) to ensure all relevant interest groups in the Upper Main region were represented. An information session refreshed participants' knowledge of the case study and provided additional context for the discussion. Students then tackled two key questions: which sectors should pay for water extraction, and whether fees should be earmarked for specific purposes. The combination of role-play and World Café created an immersive, multi-perspective dialogue that brought the policy debate to life.

Figure 8. Briefing and information session



Figure 9. Collection of workshop results



Lessons learned from the implementation within RETOUCH NEXUS

- ✓ **The informal rotating format encourages active participation:** The World Café structure, with its café-style setting and successive discussion rounds, creates a relaxed and generative atmosphere that resonate with student audiences, fostering lively exchange and reducing the barriers to open dialogue that more formal formats can produce.
- ✓ **Role-playing deepens the quality of debate:** Assigning participants to represent specific stakeholder groups encourages them to engage with perspectives beyond their own, surfacing diverse interests and positions that enrich discussion and bring the complexity of real-world policy debates to life.



- ✓ **International diversity strengthens cross-cultural learning:** Involving students from different countries introduces varied cultural backgrounds and comparative insights on water governance, adding a valuable layer of perspective to the discussion.
- ✓ **Embedding activities in existing courses ensures relevance and attendance:** Integrating the World Café into an established academic programme guarantees that participants arrive with the necessary prior knowledge and institutional commitment, reducing logistical barriers and enhancing the quality of engagement.

Do It Yourself!

1.		Define the topic and key questions	Identify a relevant, debatable issue and formulate two or three clear questions to guide the discussion. Ensure the topic is sufficiently complex to generate diverse perspectives across stakeholder groups. A well-defined topic keeps the dialogue focused and contributes to creating actionable insights that are relevant to your objectives.
2.		Prepare stakeholder roles	Map out the key interest groups relevant to the topic and create role cards with brief descriptions of each group's interests and positions. A good preparation of role cards ensures that diverse perspectives are represented in the discussion, deepening the quality of the debate.
3.		Set up the café environment	Arrange the room with small tables of four to five seats, provide paper tablecloths or flipcharts for notetaking, and create a relaxed, informal atmosphere. The physical setup is central to the World Café method and encourages participants to engage more freely than in a formal room setting.
4.		Brief participants	Hold a short information session to ensure all participants have the necessary background knowledge and understand their assigned stakeholder roles before discussions begin. An adequate briefing prevents confusion during the discussion and ensures that all participants can contribute meaningfully.
5.		Facilitate rotating rounds	Run two to three discussion rounds of fifteen to twenty minutes each, with participants rotating to new tables after each round while one host remains to summarise the previous conversation for newcomers. The rotation exposes participants to a wider range of perspectives and builds collective understanding across the group progressively.
6.		Harvest and synthesise insights	Conclude with a plenary session where table hosts share key findings, patterns and areas of agreement or tension, drawing connections across the different discussion rounds. Harvesting insights ensures that the knowledge generated during the café rounds is captured and made visible to all participants.



7.



Follow up with participants

Share a summary of outcomes with participants, invite feedback on the method and explore opportunities for continued engagement or application of insights. Following up sustains momentum beyond the session, demonstrates that participants' contributions are valued and supports the translation of dialogue into concrete outcomes.



3.5.2 Water Experience Container



Implementation within RETOUCH Nexus *Water Experience Container*

The Water Experience Container is a mobile, immersive installation developed by VITO within the Flemish WaterProof project, designed to translate complex water management solutions into an accessible, engaging experience. Rather than relying on conventional dissemination tools such as websites or presentations, the container offers a visual and auditory journey that showcases lessons learned from the Tielt Noord business park, a greyfield site demonstrating innovative rainwater capture, storage, and reuse systems linked to the WEFE Nexus (water harvested for industrial process use or irrigation by local farmers).

The installation consists of two container volumes featuring an immersive audio tour, developed in collaboration with a Flemish exhibition builder, an audio production company, and VITO's water research and communication teams. Within RETOUCH NEXUS, the container was deployed at multiple events across Flanders between 2024 and 2025, reaching stakeholders from industry, business parks, intermunicipal organisations, local authorities, technology providers and water experts. Deployments ranged from project partner visits to large public events like Flemish Open Industry Day, with guided tours adapted to each audience, from high-level introductions to in-depth technical explanations. The overarching objective is to inspire stakeholders from other business parks to implement sustainable water management practices and WEFE solutions on their own sites.

Figure 10. Three-dimensional modelling of the water experience container



Lessons learned from the implementation within RETOUCH NEXUS

- ✓ **Early planning and clear responsibilities enable smooth deployment:** Designating a single contact person at each event location to coordinate logistics ensures smooth deployment and clear accountability. With a mobile installation travelling across multiple venues, early planning and well-defined roles are essential to avoid last-minute complications and ensure consistent delivery.
- ✓ **Formalising commitments strengthens accountability and impact:** Defining target numbers of contacts and visitors in advance – ideally through a shared agreement or charter – sets clear expectations for all parties involved and supports accountability. Agreeing on these targets early also helps justify the investment and provides a basis for monitoring and reporting on the reach and impacts of the action.



- ✓ **Systematic monitoring and debriefing drive continuous improvement:** Registering stakeholder engagement data during each event and organising a structured debrief afterwards enables the team to capture insights, track progress against indicators and refine the approach for future deployments. Building this practice into the deployment plan from the outset ensures that learning is not lost between events.

Do It Yourself!

1.		Define objectives and target audiences	Clearly articulate the purpose of the engagement and identify the stakeholder groups to be reached – this ensures content, format and level of interaction align with intended outcomes.
2.		Assess feasibility and expected return on investment	Balance the required investment in time, budget and organisational effort against expected returns such as stakeholder interest, visitor numbers, knowledge uptake and potential follow-up collaborations.
3.		Develop content in collaboration with experts	Co-create the installation and narrative with technical experts and communication specialists to ensure both scientific accuracy and accessibility for non-expert audiences.
4.		Plan deployment and stakeholder interaction in advance	Integrate the mechanism into relevant events, define organisational responsibilities, prepare logistical arrangements (transport, power supply, space requirements) and ensure trained guides are available.
5.		Prepare templates for monitoring and documentation	Develop simple templates for event planning, stakeholder registration, indicator monitoring and post-event debriefing to enable consistent implementation, evaluation and continuous improvement.
6.		Explore opportunities for reuse and adaptation	While full development of an immersive installation is resource-intensive, actively seek opportunities to redeploy existing assets at additional events, adapting the guided experience to new contexts and audiences.



3.5.3 Workshop 3 – HHNK



Implementation within RETOUCH Nexus *Workshop with HHNK*

This activity was the third in a series of workshops supporting the water authority HHNK in developing a participatory track for their Freshwater Availability Programme. The session brought together approximately 10 programme managers, policy practitioners, and water management experts over two half-day sessions in late June and mid-July 2025, totalling five hours. Rather than following a conventional workshop script, the session evolved responsively: when it became clear that the team needed more time to work through the complexity of stakeholder mapping, the facilitator adapted the objectives on the spot and introduced a structured homework exercise as an alternative format.

The workshop aimed to help the team clarify who their stakeholders are, why they should be involved and at what level of participation – ranging from informing and consulting to co-production and collaboration. The session recapped outcomes from previous workshops, revisited stakeholder motivations, and introduced the participation ladder as a framework. When the discussion revealed that the team first needed a clearer overview of stakeholders per programme theme, three of the planned agenda items were set aside in favour of two structured assignments completed independently by subgroups: one mapping stakeholders and their role in the participatory process, and one gathering ideas on the overall structure of the participation plan. This flexible, iterative approach –moving from workshop to homework and back– proved particularly effective for a team of busy practitioners who preferred practical tasks over theoretical discussion.

Figure 11. Participation at the workshop



Lessons learned from the implementation within RETOUCH NEXUS

- ✓ **Creating space for reflexivity strengthens the quality of engagement:** Allowing the team to express their needs mid-session and adjusting objectives accordingly proved highly valuable. Building in moments for reflection and responsiveness early in the process contributes to ensure that the section remains genuinely aligned with where participants are.
- ✓ **Favouring practical assignments over theory:** Practitioners with busy schedules tend to disengage from theoretical explanations. Hands-on exercises and concrete tasks keep participants focused and motivated, making the time invested more productive and the outcomes more actionable.



- ✓ **Homework can outperform in-room discussion:** Structured assignments completed independently give stakeholders time and space to reflect, often yielding more considered and extensive results than live group discussions where dominant voices can take over. Combining workshops with take-home tasks creates a more balanced and inclusive participation dynamic.
- ✓ **Iterative series build stronger engagement:** Embedding individual sessions within a recurring workshop series allows engagement to develop progressively in line with stakeholder needs. Returning to the same group over time creates stronger connections, buildings trust and enables outcomes that go beyond what a single standalone session could achieve.

Do It Yourself!

1.		Capture the core of the assignment	Identify the essential question or task you need stakeholders to work through, and distil it into a clear, focused exercise that can stand alone without your direct presence.
2.		Translate the assignment into the most suitable format	Decide whether the exercise works best as an online shared document, a structured template, or a physical handout – choose the format that fits your stakeholders' working habits and context.
3.		Share it with extremely clear instructions	Communicate your background, purpose, objectives, expectations, frameworks, agreements and timeframe explicitly – since you will not be present to clarify in real time, clarity upfront is essential.
4.		Synthesise results and provide feedback	Consolidate the input received, identify key insights and share back with stakeholders how their contributions have been incorporated – closing the loop reinforces trust and continued engagement.



Conclusion

This handbook set out to do something that research projects rarely do rigorously: to turn the experience of doing stakeholder engagement into transferable, practice-ready knowledge. Across six European case studies — spanning Belgium, Germany, Malta, the Netherlands, Slovakia and Spain — the RETOUCH NEXUS project tested, adapted and refined a diverse set of innovative mechanisms for stakeholder engagement and public participation in cross-sectoral water governance. The result is not a theoretical framework, but a grounded, evidence-based resource built from real implementation experience, genuine lessons learned, and honest reflection on what worked, what did not, and why.

The five categories of innovative mechanisms documented here — Creative Communication Strategies, Communities of Practice, Fostering Youth Involvement, Digital Tools and Platforms, and Interactive Learning Experiences — collectively illustrate that innovation in engagement is not about novelty for its own sake. It is about purposefully shifting the role of stakeholders from passive audiences to active co-producers of governance knowledge and outcomes. Taken together, the mechanisms show that this shift is achievable across very different governance contexts, institutional landscapes and resource levels, provided that methods are carefully tailored, implemented with consistency, and supported by genuine institutional commitment.

Several features of this handbook are worth highlighting as genuinely distinctive. First, the mechanisms presented here were not designed in a laboratory — they were developed and tested under real governance conditions, across contexts as diverse as island water scarcity in Malta and freshwater programme development in the Netherlands. This gives the lessons learned a credibility and specificity that desk-based guidance cannot replicate. Second, the handbook addresses an often-overlooked dimension of participatory research: the responsible involvement of vulnerable and non-expert groups, including school children. The development of dedicated safeguarding templates — covering data collection, parental consent and GDPR-compliant data protection — offers a practical and replicable framework that goes beyond what is typically provided in engagement guidance. Third, the cross-case comparative dimension of the handbook, supported by the RETOUCH NEXUS Case Studies Dashboard, enables practitioners to identify patterns and contrasts across governance settings — a resource with significant value for the broader European water governance community.

The handbook is designed to be useful beyond the RETOUCH NEXUS project. Practitioners, policymakers and researchers working on water governance, environmental management, and cross-sectoral sustainability challenges will find in these pages concrete, adaptable tools. The "Do It Yourself" guides accompanying each mechanism are structured to enable replication in new contexts, with appropriate adaptation to local conditions.

At the same time, a note of caution is warranted. The mechanisms documented here are not universally applicable, and this handbook does not advocate for their uncritical adoption. As the pros and cons assessments throughout the handbook make clear, innovative engagement approaches are typically more resource-intensive than conventional formats, and their success depends heavily on the capacities, motivations and institutional contexts of those involved. Co-creation can raise expectations that governance systems are not yet equipped to meet; digital tools can inadvertently exclude less digitally literate participants; and creative formats, if not carefully managed, may sacrifice technical rigour for accessibility. Practitioners are encouraged to use this handbook as a starting point for informed decision-making — selecting, combining and adapting mechanisms in ways that are honest



about their limitations and realistic about what participation can achieve within any given governance context.



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