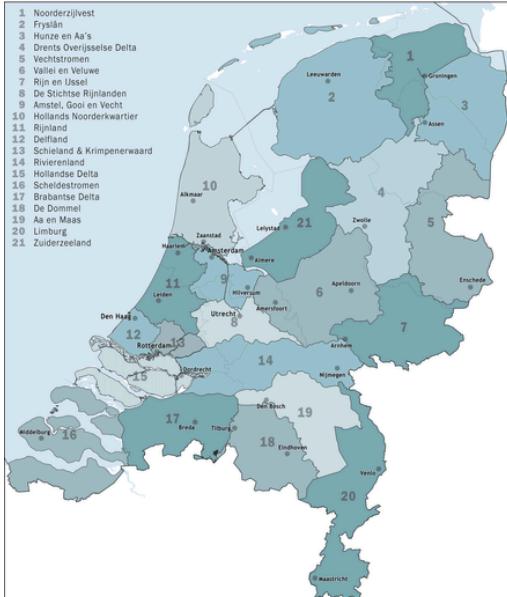




The RETOUCH NEXUS project promotes a cross-sectoral Water–Energy–Food–Ecosystems (WEFE) Nexus approach to support a resilient EU water economy. It ensures that water governance considers ecological, social, and economic dimensions, fostering coherence and effectiveness across sectors and governance levels.

WATERBEHEER 21 Waterschappen

2023



Map by Unie van Waterschappen

CONTEXT

This policy brief outlines a pathway toward more sustainable and integrated water governance through effective stakeholder participation. Drawing on insights from 21 regional water authorities and 11 expert interviews, we identify key barriers in formalising participation within programmes and policy consultation processes and propose targeted actions to address them. The analysis combines scientific literature and publicly available policy documents, offering practical guidance for policy and decision-makers in water governance.

NEXUS GOVERNANCE CHALLENGES & BARRIERS

The Netherlands faces increasingly complex water challenges driven by climate change, including polluted waterways, soil subsidence, sea level rise, and salinisation, all compounded by growing and competing demands from cities, agriculture, and industry. Addressing these issues requires socio-economic and political adaptation grounded in a whole-of-society approach, moving beyond centralised and technocratic processes. This shift underpins the rise of integrated, adaptive, and nexus-based water governance, highlighting the interconnections across sectors, scales, and actors. In this context, public participation is essential for legitimate policy and decision-making. Yet effective participation is not guaranteed: when poorly designed or implemented, it can undermine outcomes, trust, and legitimacy, especially when reduced to tokenistic box-ticking rather than genuine dialogue.

The 21 Dutch water authorities are adopting a nexus-based approach and rethinking public participation. While historically engaged in participatory practices, such as projects and elections, their legitimacy now increasingly depends on the structural role of participation and adequate stakeholder engagement in policy processes.

The challenge lies in understanding when and how participation can be meaningfully and effectively embedded in policy development and decision-making, in ways appropriate to the specific policy challenges.

KEY MESSAGES & PRIORITY ACTIONS

- An integrated, adaptive, nexus approach to policy establishment in water governance requires, and is supported by, effective and meaningful participation.
- The major gaps experienced by water authorities in participatory processes are organisational and cultural, knowledge, procedural and in internal capacity.
- Policy development processes ask for nexus sensitive and adequate participatory processes and stakeholder engagement that are thoughtfully designed.
- Action to meaningful participation is institutionalisation within the organisation, knowledge sharing and capacity strengthening.

LEGAL & INSTITUTIONAL BARRIERS TO EFFECTIVE PARTICIPATION

Two recent national legal frameworks define how public authorities in the Netherlands organise and justify participation in policy and programmes development:

1. **The Environment and Planning Act (2024)** requires all governmental authorities to justify how citizens, civil society, and other governmental bodies were involved in policy preparation and decision-making.
2. **The Decentralised Government Participation Act (2025)** obliges decentralised governments to adopt a formal participation ordinance that specifies how stakeholders are involved in the design, the implementation and evaluation of policies. These legal frameworks provide a clear mandate to strengthen participatory implementation. Neither provide operational guidelines, thereby maintaining flexibility for contextual adaptation across governance contexts and policy settings.

Stakeholder engagement is widespread but uneven across the water authorities. While most have participation ordinances, few provide detailed implementation guidelines, relying mainly on general principles. The main barrier lies in turning participation ambitions into concrete processes.



IDENTIFIED GAPS FOR INTEGRATED PARTICIPATION FOR INCLUSIVE GOVERNANCE

Stakeholder engagement mainly occurs through established networks and consultation with agricultural organisations, NGOs, municipalities, provinces, water companies, and industry. However, key governance gaps remain:

- **Organisational and cultural:** Participation and stakeholder engagement are not yet seen as an integral part of policymaking. Technocratic focus, hierarchical structures, and perceptions of lengthy processes limit shared decision-making.
- **Knowledge and responsibility:** Participation is not clearly anchored within organisational structures, with scattered knowledge and no designated staff, leading to fragmented ownership and misaligned activities.
- **Procedural:** Uncertainty persists on how to structure participation, identify stakeholders, and coordinate across sectors while avoiding fatigue.
- **Capacity:** Limited trained staff, time, and resources constrain the design and facilitation of meaningful participatory processes.

PATHWAYS TO SUSTAINABLE NEXUS WATER GOVERNANCE THROUGH EFFECTIVE PARTICIPATION



Participation across WEFE areas should be embedded at the start of policy and programme development as a structural and deliberate choice, not an afterthought. Participation should not be a goal in itself but a context-specific, stakeholder-driven process. Early reflection and clear problem framing help determine when it is needed and guide its design. Choosing participation means linking water issues to wider societal challenges and committing the necessary time, flexibility, and space within policies to adapt to local developments.

Designing participation clearly and with care is essential to determine who to involve, why, and how, ideally together with stakeholders. The process design, expected added value, and resource implications should be made explicit, along with scope, timing, budget, and risks. While limited participation may sometimes suffice, it may not be perceived as such by stakeholders. Provide transparency, define conflict resolution and manage expectations. Ensure transparency about the expected power delegation in relation to stakeholders' influence on the final product to manage expectations.

Create adequate and feasible stakeholder engagement. Stakeholders across sectors and scales should be identified and engaged early, with their roles validated through consultation. A systematic approach, especially attentive to minority and underrepresented groups, helps avoid blind spots. Participation methods should fit the stakeholder landscape, policy challenge, available resources, and desired objectives. Keep power dynamics into account.

Effective participation requires clarity, transparency, and mutual gains and learning. Transparent expectations, receptivity, clear roles, and accountability build trust and shared norms. Monitoring should capture both outcomes and stakeholder experiences, supported by an engaged policy team that keeps the process adaptive and receptive. Emphasising learning in practice and sharing successes and lessons across stakeholders, teams and clusters strengthens collective knowledge and external relations. Adaptive capacity remains essential. Most misunderstandings come from mismanaged expectations, conflicting values, and limited incorporation of results.

Rely on and mobilise existing knowledge within their organisations, particularly that of environmental and area managers, while avoiding overburdening. Their project-based experience provides a foundation for policy-level participation, and cross-disciplinary teams can link practical and strategic knowledge. External expertise can strengthen capacity and support learning, while staff training builds long-term skills and reduces dependency on outside support. However, when resources are limited, hiring external help can be beneficial, but this should not come at the expense of the policy team's involvement.

Create a long term, participatory organisational culture for meaningful, structured participation. Authorities and board members should promote organisational awareness of the value of participation. Sharing examples, guidelines, or a participation roadmap can help embed it in programmes and policymaking, emphasising flexibility and adaptability. Effective participation requires evolving practices from ambitions into a core part of the governance identity, supporting a shift toward integrated, inclusive, and sustainable water governance.

OPTIONABLE MEASURES

- Check-list / reflection forms / questionnaires.
- Systematically discuss and document the participatory motives.
- Create a "seat at the table" principle in early planning.
- Develop a flexible participation design guide for policy and programmes.
- Co-create and iterate in a design team.
- Mobilise existing expertise and encourage cross-team collaboration in process design.
- Conduct a stakeholder analysis at the start of each policy or programme trajectory.
- Use stakeholder matrices to visualise interests, influence, and engagement levels.
- Apply nexus-oriented engagement exercises.
- Develop a participation method and monitoring framework with quality indicators.
- Record and communicate how participatory input is applied.
- Reflexive evaluations and learning sessions / periodic external evaluations.
- Engage with learning institutes and co-share other authorities.
- Establish an internal participation network / focal point / contact person to coordinate efforts.
- Organise training sessions and workshops for staff on participatory methods.
- Hold learning opportunities to share experiences across departments.
- Take part in external knowledge networks.
- Include participation performance and reflection in board discussions
- Create a learning agenda, an internal participation platform or hub for sharing tools, templates, methods and stories.
- Align participation objectives with climate adaptation, spatial planning, and drought resilience programmes.

