

Public participation in environmental matters refers to the sharing by individuals or groups of their views in decision-making processes regarding the environment, through mechanisms such as voting, participating in consultations, petitioning, and campaigning, among others.

Public participation in environmental matters is important, both intrinsically as part of a democratic society and in helping improve the quality and effectiveness of environmental decision-making. It can identify environmental challenges and novel solutions, enable policymakers to rely on valuable and unique local knowledge, raise the sense of ownership around policy developments, reduce conflicts by increasing the legitimacy and acceptance of public decisions and empower disadvantaged groups.

Public participation does not improve environmental policies if public input is not taken into consideration by decision-makers or if those who have unique and pertinent knowledge are not involved. This may be the case for disadvantaged groups that often remain excluded from public spaces due to a combination of barriers such as time availability due to caring responsibilities, access to information and financial limitations. However, including these groups in environmental policymaking is essential to respond to their needs and benefit from the solutions they can offer.

SEI supports environmental authorities in Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) in developing a new Environmental Strategy and Action Plan (BiH ESAP). BiH is a signatory of the *United Nations Economic Commission for Europe's* Convention on Access to Information, Public Participation in Decision-making and Access to Justice in Environmental Matters (Aarhus Convention). The Laws on Environmental Protection of the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina, Republika Srpska and the Brčko District state that each individual and organization can participate in environmental decision-making processes. However, analyses by the European Commission has shown that in practice, the participation of civil society organizations in environmental policy formulation and development still faces some challenges. There is also room for improvement in terms of broader public participation in strategic environmental assessments and environmental impact assessments in BiH as well as public access to information. Participation is a key theme in the BiH ESAP process, both in terms of the way in which it has developed and its contents.

The draft BiH ESAP recognizes participatory challenges and proposes several objectives and measures to improve public participation in the next decade. Public participation is emphasized in the action plan at the BiH level in several priority areas, such as biodiversity and chemicals, where regular consultations and cooperation with the civil sector are envisaged, including awareness-raising campaigns for citizens. The draft Action Plan for the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina, Republika Srpska and the Brčko District aims to improve the inclusion of citizens in decision-making about the environment, especially in environmental impact assessment processes and issuing environmental permits. They also

include measures to increase the participation of disadvantaged groups. This is especially important given that disadvantaged groups are less represented among public officials, leaving their needs and inputs more likely to be unaddressed. For example, while they are not necessarily socially disadvantaged, women and Roma people are underrepresented in BiH policy-making circles.

These BiH ESAP objectives and measures are the result of a participatory process in which a wide range of stakeholders were involved in developing the draft, including 13 members of civil society organizations and 16 members of associations. The draft BiH ESAP components were also submitted to public consultations. Once the BiH ESAP is approved, the real work starts with implementation. The bulk of the tasks will be carried out by environmental institutions, but public participation will play an important role during that stage too. It is key in maintaining authorities accountable, calling for timely, relevant and high-quality projects and investments, and raising ambition levels for further environmental policy development, SEI writes.