

# INTERNATIONAL WATERS EXPERIENCE NOTES

## Connecting every drop: A participatory approach to Water Policy Development in Costa Rica amidst COVID-19



**Abstract:** The GEF CReW+ project, supported Costa Rica to strengthen its institutional development and management capacities to face the challenges of the water and sanitation sector. This experience describes a comprehensive approach to water resource management, exemplified by the development of Costa Rica's National Water Policy. Through stakeholder engagement and innovative use of technology, it assesses governance structures, institutional capacities, and the condition of water resources. Utilizing virtual forums and automated transcription services, the project ensures broad participation and systematic analysis of inputs. The participatory process fosters consensus-building and empowers diverse stakeholders to shape policy directives and strategic actions. By prioritizing transparency, inclusivity, and efficiency, this project sets a standard for sustainable water management practices, offering a replicable model for addressing complex socio-environmental challenges worldwide.

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# Connecting every drop: A participatory approach to Water Policy Development in Costa Rica amidst COVID-19

Experience of the GEF - sponsored

An integrated approach to water and wastewater management in the Wider Caribbean Region using innovative solutions and sustainable financing mechanisms (GEF CReW+ Project)

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## PROJECT DESCRIPTION

The GEF CReW+ project is a partnership project funded by the Global Environment Facility (GEF) that is being co-implemented by the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB) and the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) in 18 countries of the Wider Caribbean Region (WCR). This project builds upon its previous successful phase “The Caribbean Regional Fund for Wastewater Management (CReW)” project (2011-2017). GEF CReW+ is being executed by the Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) GmbH, the Organisation of the American States (OAS) and the Secretariat of the Cartagena Convention (CAR/CRU) on behalf of the IDB and UNEP respectively. The GEF CReW+ project provides innovative solutions and mitigation strategies for untreated water to improve public health and ecosystem services.

In Costa Rica, the objective of the GEF CReW+ project is to support its institutional development and management capacities to face the challenges of the water and sanitation sector, and the application of financial mechanisms and innovative technologies for IWRM. This includes innovative structures and solutions for integral projects in the ASADAS, which allow, among other objectives, access to resources from the Environmental Canon for Discharges and additional resources from other sources, as well as the execution of demonstrative innovation pilots.

The present experience focuses on the activities conducted under *Component 1. Institutional, legislative, regulatory and policy reforms for integrated water and wastewater management*, of the project which aimed to strengthen the governance of the drinking water and sanitation sector by updating the National Water Policy and its Action Plan (2009), in compliance with the provisions of the Ministry of Planning and integrating recent advances in national policies on wastewater and drinking water sanitation, as well as policy or regulatory criteria on water quality and reuse, and adaptation to extreme climate conditions, among others.

## THE EXPERIENCE

### Issue

Costa Rica has a National Water Policy approved in 2009 and a National Plan for the Integrated Management of Water Resources approved in 2008, which have governed the work of the Water Directorate of the Ministry of Environment and Energy (DA-MINAE). This Ministry is responsible for water management and the institutions responsible for the management of the country's water. The country has an abundant legal framework in the field of water: more than 100 laws and regulations and about 20 institutions related to the subject. This situation, rather than contributing to efficient governance, has generated duplication of functions, overlaps and gaps that make it necessary to articulate management, but it mostly highlights the need for a new Water Law. There is a legal vacuum, as there is an 80-year-old law, which does not respond to the current challenges of loss of water in quality and quantity, increase in demand, but decrease in supply and serious impact on ecosystems.

In order to manage water resources in a way that is more in line with the needs felt by the population more technically correct and with updated information, DA-MINAE prioritized among its actions, **updating of the National Water Policy (PHN) and the Action Plan for the Integrated Management of Water Resources (PAGIRH)**.

It is within this framework that the GEF CReW+ Project supported the process of updating the PHN and PAGIRH. The execution of the activities had to follow specific requirements established by law, for this a bridge of articulation and coordination was managed with the DA-MINAE. In line with the Executive Decree No. 41058-MINAE in 2018 of the National Water Governance Mechanism, The National Forum (FN), the Regional Forums (FR) and the Water Governance Group (GGA) were incorporated in the process. Additionally, a Technical Advisory Group (GTC), in which the National Committee on Hydrology and Meteorology (CONAHYME) (created by Executive Decree No. 39349-MINAE), was also to be included in the process.

### Addressing the Issue

The process began with the "Situational Diagnosis of Integrated Water Resource Management in Costa Rica," a comprehensive assessment examining governance structures, institutional capacities, financial resources, technical capabilities, and the condition of water resources in the country. This diagnosis encompassed an analysis of the legal framework governing water management, including international treaties, laws, decrees, and other pertinent legal instruments. Stakeholder engagement was pivotal, involving bilateral meetings with representatives from public institutions responsible for water resource management functions, as well as consultations with private agricultural sectors to gather insights into future crop projections and geographical expansion plans. This multifaceted approach provided a thorough understanding of the current state of water resource management in Costa Rica.

Subsequently, the development of the National Water Policy adopted a participatory methodology, ensuring representation from diverse sectors of society across all hydrographic units in the country. Initial participant lists provided by the Water Directorate were augmented through a comprehensive mapping exercise, incorporating new representatives identified during regional forums. A total of 668 individuals from various sectors, including the public, civil society, municipal authorities, academia, and the private sector, were identified and contacted to participate in these forums.

The National Forum brought together 486 participants, accounting for 73% of the total number of identified actors. The public sector constituted the largest contingent with 33.1% participation, followed by civil society (29.6%) and municipal authorities (20.6%). While academia and the private sector had fewer representatives, their contributions remained significant.

Participants were encouraged to share their perspectives, knowledge, and experiences related to water resource management within their respective hydrological units. Emphasis was placed on collaborative analysis and the exploration of potential solutions to identified challenges. The final forum provided an opportunity for prioritization and reflection from a national perspective.

Due to the constraints imposed by the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic, the regional and national forums were conducted virtually. Sessions were organized into two mornings, each lasting approximately 150 minutes. The primary objective was to solicit input from participants regarding water resource challenges and the state of management within their respective regions. Participants were divided into subgroups based on their location within the hydrographic basin and sectoral representation. Discussions centered on identifying causes of problems and proposing solutions tailored to each hydrological unit.

Inputs generated during working group sessions were compiled into matrices and shared with all participants. Comprehensive records were maintained through audio recordings and transcriptions using the SONIX® automated transcription service. These transcripts underwent a coding process facilitated by the Atlas TI® program, enabling systematic analysis of key themes and insights emerging from forum discussions. Notably, mentions of factors related to institutionality and territory were predominant, underscoring their significance in the context of water resource management.

The National Forum focused on prioritizing issues identified in regional forums, as reflected in the Sankey Diagrams. Working groups collaboratively defined strategic action lines and formulated actions for inclusion in the National Water Policy and Action Plan for Integrated Water Resource Management (IWRM). Seventeen key themes emerged from regional forums, including governance, policy and legal frameworks, institutional capacity, financing mechanisms, water use conflicts, protection of water sources, territorial planning, pollution, climate change, watershed management, and infrastructure needs. Prioritization exercises conducted during the National Forum highlighted governance, regulatory planning, source protection, climate change adaptation, monitoring and control, infrastructure development, and pollution mitigation as top priorities.

Inputs gathered during these sessions informed the development of key policy directives, transversal themes, objectives, expected outcomes, and strategic actions outlined in the National Water Policy and the IWRM Action Plan.

The process continued with the sensitization of the Policy and Plan back to the stakeholders, face-to-face forums were organized in each hydrological unit, supplemented by a virtual national forum. Qualitative analyses of inputs received during regional forums were presented, along with preliminary policy proposals, to solicit feedback and endorsement from participants. These forums facilitated discussion on water balance, climate change projections, the vision of the National Water Policy, guiding principles, key policy directives, objectives, and expected outcomes.

The approval of the National Water Policy marked a significant milestone, shifting focus towards operationalizing strategic actions outlined in the policy framework. Timelines were established, delineating responsibilities for execution among relevant stakeholders.

Compliance with Indigenous Law No. 6172 necessitated further steps. This law mandates consultation on policy and action plans for IWRM in all indigenous territories, in accordance with the General Mechanism for Consultation of Indigenous Peoples. While this consultation process was not integrated into the project, efforts were made to support the Ministry of Environment and Energy (MINAE) in developing a consultation plan aligned with legal requirements.

Overall, the participatory process undertaken in developing the National Water Policy for Costa Rica reflects a concerted effort to incorporate diverse perspectives, prioritize key challenges, and formulate actionable strategies for sustainable water resource management. Despite challenges posed by the pandemic and legal obligations regarding indigenous consultation, the collaborative approach adopted underscores a commitment to inclusive governance and stakeholder engagement in addressing complex water management issues.

## **RESULTS AND LEARNING**

The process of developing a National Water Policy, evidence based and that incorporates the needs and future plans of the different sectors of society, can be a complex one. The process of participatory development of the National Water Policy and the Action Plan for IWRM implemented in Costa Rica, showed a higher level of knowledge of the participants of all the UH of the country, with greater clarity about the causes that are generating the problems of both water resources and their management. The contributions received really considered that the policy is a guiding framework for the future of water resources management. A greater understanding of Integrated Water Resource Management and the need to strengthen governance and governance were demonstrated with a strengthened MINAE stewardship, leading a constituted water subsector, with updated laws with an integrative vision and with spaces that involve citizen participation.

Despite the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic restriction, the project sought innovative methods to ensure the engagement of the needed stakeholders, generated adequate conditions to engage key stakeholders and to gather significant and valuable views in a needed participatory approach, and utilized

innovative tools to collect, analyze and streamline all the views received in order for them to have a strong voice in the development of the Policy. Some specific lessons learned include:

- The formation of a multidisciplinary team by DA-MINAE with the support of the consulting team with diverse but complementary visions around the topic addressed, in this case the integrated management of water resources, allows us to have a wealth of inputs to be able to analyze the various aspects of the subject.
- The involvement of research professionals from public universities contributes to the incorporation of methodologies, techniques and models that are updated and adapted to the country's own conditions.
- Mapping actors with principles of inclusivity as part of the baseline successfully contributes to any participatory process.
- A good call is key to ensure participation, for this it is effective to have a technological tool that allows you to follow up on the sending of the invitation and the confirmation.
- One way to ensure the participation of the guests (academia, government, civil society, among others) in the forums is to ensure a sufficient space of time and the work of groups, in this way they are allowed to present their arguments, so that others listen, react and agree.
- Recording and taking note of the contributions certifies that the presentations are transcribed without any alteration and, therefore, are considered in the Policy and the Action Plan, in this case using the SONIX® automated transcription service and coding process facilitated by the Atlas TI® program
- The use of innovative tools facilitates the systematization of the qualitative inputs received in the Forums, which, together with the Sankey Diagrams derived from the frequency in which the codes are mentioned, allows for the more precise identification of the Policy Axes.
- Any public policy proposal must be returned to the actors involved, so that they receive inputs for their improvement and subsequent validation, ensuring the participation of indigenous peoples.
- Public policies must be built within a frame of reference based on the criteria of all the actors involved in the management of water resources and the governing body in the matter.

## REPLICATION

The methodology employed in the development of the National Water Policy in Costa Rica serves as a robust model that can be replicated in various other projects aimed at addressing complex socio-environmental challenges. Firstly, the emphasis on stakeholder engagement and participatory decision-making processes ensures that diverse perspectives are considered, leading to more inclusive and effective outcomes. By involving representatives from government agencies, civil society organizations, academia, and the private sector, projects can benefit from a wide range of expertise and insights, ultimately enhancing the quality and relevance of proposed solutions.

Secondly, the use of technology, such as virtual forums and automated transcription services, facilitates remote collaboration and data management, making the participatory process more accessible and efficient. This approach allows for broader participation, overcoming geographical barriers and logistical constraints. Moreover, the systematic analysis of inputs using software tools like Atlas TI® enables thorough examination of key themes and patterns, providing valuable insights for policy formulation and strategic planning. By adopting a similar methodology, projects in other contexts can enhance stakeholder engagement, promote transparency, and foster collaborative efforts towards sustainable development goals.

## SIGNIFICANCE

The methodology employed, coupled with the strategic integration of technology, underscores a significant advancement in project management and stakeholder engagement, thereby enhancing the value

proposition as a GEF project. By adopting a participatory approach that incorporates diverse perspectives from stakeholders across sectors, the project ensures alignment with broader development objectives and community needs. This not only enhances the relevance and effectiveness of interventions but also fosters a sense of ownership and accountability among stakeholders, ultimately contributing to sustainable outcomes.

Furthermore, the utilization of technology streamlines communication, data collection, and analysis processes, optimizing resource allocation and decision-making. The project benefits from increased transparency, efficiency, and accountability, as evidenced by the systematic tracking of inputs and outputs facilitated by technological tools. Overall, the innovative combination of methodology and technology not only maximizes the impact of investments but also reinforces their commitment to fostering inclusive and sustainable development practices.

## REFERENCES

[www.gefcrew.org](http://www.gefcrew.org)

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## KEYWORDS

- ◆ Participatory approach
- ◆ Tech tools in consultations
- ◆ Policy Development

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