

# Gebietskooperation Experiences in Lower Saxony: Survey Results from Members



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## BACKGROUND

The E.U. Water Framework Directive of 2000 requires all E.U. member nations to achieve “good status” of water quality by 2015. The directive requires member nations to consult with stakeholders and encourages them to promote active engagement in planning processes. In the federal system of Germany, decisions about how to include stakeholders are made at the state level. Across Germany, different states have employed different strategies and processes to do so (Jager 2011; Ernst 2009; Kampa et al. 2003). This research study focuses on one state, Lower Saxony (Niedersachsen), which has developed innovative processes to include multiple stakeholders via repeated interactions over time.

In 2005 the Lower Saxony Ministry of Environment established watershed-based “Gebietskooperationen” (area cooperations) to dialogue between administrators, water management stakeholders and the public in developing plans to achieve water quality standards. The Ministry of Environment indicated the hope that these deliberative bodies would develop innovative proposals and bring new perspectives into planning (MU Niedersachsen 2005). In a letter providing guidance to Gebietskooperationen leaders, the Minister of Environment said the bodies should generate lists of measures that are innovative, creative, and feasible, with specific reference to those that are not unduly expensive (Sander 2005). He also urged the leaders to generate a common understanding of goals and measures, drawing on scientific knowledge as well as local experiences from those living in the area.

Although 34 watersheds were identified across Lower Saxony, planning for several small watersheds were consolidated, for a total of 28 Gebietskooperationen. The Ministry of Environment established that Gebietskooperation membership should be limited to no more than 10 permanent members representing the most important water stakeholders in the watershed, such as counties (1), communities (1), consumer associations (1), agriculture/farming and forestry (2), water suppliers (1), industry (1), environmental organizations (1), and NLWKN (Lower Saxony Land, Water, Coast, and Nature Protection agency, a state government agency) (2).

Additional stakeholders could be added if necessary, and in fact this was common practice in some of the Gebietskooperationen, because watersheds typically cross jurisdictional boundaries. For example, in several of the Gebietskooperationen, more than one county participated.

In 2005, the NLWKN facilitated Gebietskooperation establishment of permanent members and a leadership team of two people, leader (Leitung) and manager (Geschäftsführer). The NLWKN agency first asked if any members wanted to serve in the leadership positions, and if not then NLWKN personnel fulfilled these roles. Across Lower Saxony, NLWKN personnel served as leader in over half of the Gebietskooperationen and manager in over 80% of the Gebietskooperationen. The Lower Saxony Minister of Environment provided 15,000 Euros per year per Gebietskooperationen, starting in 2006, to support their work.

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The Gebietskooperationen met approximately two to three times per year, starting in 2005. The leaders, working closely with NLWKN, developed meeting agendas and facilitated the meetings. Over several years, the Gebietskooperationen focused on water quality assessment, identifying heavily modified water bodies, and developing and prioritizing suggested measures to improve water quality.

## RESEARCH METHODS

For this study, we selected three Gebietskooperationen in Lower Saxony. Following in-depth interviews with 5 to 9 leaders and members in each group (19 interviews in total), we developed a survey questionnaire to gather information about the views of a wide range of members of these bodies. Our target sample was members of the three Gebietskooperationen who had attended at least three meetings between 2005 and 2010 (n=54). Of this sample we were able to reach 39, 31 of whom agreed to participate in the survey (79% response rate).

The survey was conducted by telephone, in German, by research team members at Leuphana University in Lüneburg, between June and September 2011. The survey instrument contained mostly closed-ended questions, with a few additional open-ended questions. It took about 20 minutes to complete. Questions focused on several aspects of the Gebietskooperationen, as described in the Results section below. In particular, we were interested in participant perceptions about what the Gebietskooperationen have accomplished, what factors are influential in these accomplishments, the individual benefits gained from participating, and whether participation has affected the organizations that the members represent.

## RESULTS

### *Success of the Gebietskooperationen*

The questions concerning the groups' accomplishments asked participants about different criteria for success of the Gebietskooperationen (GK). These ranged from process criteria, such as the inclusion of new viewpoints into the planning process, to outcome criteria like the improvement of water quality.

With regard to planning process, most of the participants in the survey (55%) agreed or strongly agreed that the Gebietskooperationen have "improved water planning" (see Table 1). About 68% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed with the statement, "the Gebietskooperation brought new perspectives into discussions and planning" (while only 16% did not agree and the rest neither agreed nor disagreed). About 48% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that the Gebietskooperation "generated innovative solutions to water issues that would not have happened otherwise" (compared to 21% who did not agree). About 67% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that the Gebietskooperation "generated dialogue among administrators, water management stakeholders, and the public" (compared to 10% who did not agree). About 53% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that the Gebietskooperation "generated a common view among the participants of the current status of the watershed as well as immediate problems and their solutions" (compared to 33% who did not agree).

**Table 1 – Participant Views of the Planning Process**

| Item   | Agree or Strongly Agree | Disagree or Strongly Disagree | Neither |
|--|-------------------------|-------------------------------|---------|
| The GK has improved water planning   | 55%                     | 17%                           | 28%     |
| The GK brought new perspectives into discussions and planning  | 68%                     | 16%                           | 16%     |
| The GK generated innovative solutions to water issues that would not have happened otherwise   | 48%                     | 21%                           | 21%     |
| The GK generated dialogue among administrators, water management stakeholders, and the public  | 67%                     | 10%                           | 23%     |
| The GK generated a common view among the participants of the current status of the watershed as well as immediate problems and their solutions | 53%                     | 33%                           | 13%     |

With regard to outcomes, respondents were less positive (see Table 2). For capacity building, only 3% agreed or strongly agreed that the Gebietskooperation has increased the capacity of local people to address future challenges (compared to 65% who did not agree). When asked if the Gebietskooperation has improved the implementation of water measures, only 26% percent agreed (compared to 42% who did not agree). Finally, on perhaps the most important outcome, 32% agreed or strongly agreed that the Gebietskooperation has improved water quality (compared to 39% who did not agree).

**Table 2 – Participant Views of Outcomes**

| Item   | Agree or Strongly Agree | Disagree or Strongly Disagree | Neither |
|--|-------------------------|-------------------------------|---------|
| The GK has increased capacity of local people to address future challenges beyond water issues | 3%                      | 65%                           | 32%     |
| The GK has improved implementation of water measures   | 26%                     | 42%                           | 32%     |
| The GK has improved water quality  | 32%                     | 39%                           | 29%     |

### *Key Factors for Gebietskooperation Success*

In one part of the survey we asked how important several factors had been for the accomplishments of the Gebietskooperationen. Respondents were asked to indicate, on a scale from 1 (not at all influential) to 3 (very influential), how influential the following factors were in determining the Gebietskooperation activities and accomplishments. As shown in Table 3, the highest mean item was financial resources (2.59), followed by the interests of stakeholders outside of and including the NLWKN (2.41 and 2.37, respectively), technical and scientific information (2.37), and networks (2.37). Political feasibility was considered the least important factor (2.30). Overall, each factor was rated above the midpoint of the scale, “somewhat influential.”

**Table 3 – Participant Views of Important Factors in Gebietskooperation Activities and Accomplishments**

| Factor                                  | Mean Importance* |
|---|------------------|
| Financial resources                     | 2.59             |
| Interests of Stakeholders outside NLWKN | 2.41             |
| Interests of the NLWKN                  | 2.37             |
| Technical and scientific information    | 2.37             |
| Networks                                | 2.37             |
| Political feasibility                   | 2.30             |

\*1=not at all influential, 2=somewhat influential, 3=very influential

### *Individual Benefits from Participating*

Although the main reason for creating and maintaining Gebietskooperationen was to develop recommendations for addressing water quality, participation led to some individual benefits. The survey included a number of questions asking for the positive results that the respondents had gained from their participation in the Gebietskooperationen. These positive results included increasing network connections and various kinds of learning.

Many respondents felt that they were better able to understand other stakeholders in the group as a result of their participation in the Gebietskooperation. For example, over 80% of respondents made new contacts or improved existing ones (see Table 4). Also, 68% agreed to the statement, that they had improved their understanding of what other stakeholders wanted.

**Table 4 – Participant Views of Individual Gains**

| Item  | Agree or Strongly Agree | Disagree or Strongly Disagree | Neither |
|---|-------------------------|-------------------------------|---------|
| Through my participation, I have developed contacts with new people   | 84%                     | 10%                           | 6%      |
| Through my participation, I have strengthened existing ties with people   | 81%                     | 6%                            | 13%     |
| Through my participation, I have learned new information about what other stakeholders want                           | 68%                     | 6%                            | 26%     |
| Through my participation, I have learned new information about basin scale planning and the Water Framework Directive | 71%                     | 6%                            | 23%     |
| Through my participation, I have learned new information about watershed processes and ecology                        | 58%                     | 26%                           | 16%     |
| Through my participation, I have learned new information about what is politically feasible                           | 43%                     | 20%                           | 37%     |

There was greater variance with regard to what the participants had learned. While almost three quarters of the participants said that they had learned something about the water framework directive and basin scale planning, responses to the statement that participants learned something about ecology ranged from strong disagreement to strong agreement. This wide range could reflect unevenly distributed ecological expertise at the outset of the process. Fewer than half of the respondents (43%) learned about what is politically feasible.

### ***Impact of Participation on Home Organization***

Like other participatory processes in Germany, Gebietskooperation participants each represented stakeholder groups. Thus we were interested to see if member participation had any impact on home organizations. The survey included a question: "Has your participation in the GK had any impact on your own organization's activities or accomplishments?" Most respondents (78%) answered Yes to this question. The open-ended question asking respondents to describe how this effect was felt elicited a variety of responses. Many respondents said that they were somehow involved in the implementation of the measures to improve water quality. But the most important theme among the answers of this question was that the exchange of information between the stakeholders in the watershed had improved as a consequence of the Gebietskooperation. Some respondents considered this an important outcome of the process.

### ***Comparison across Gebietskooperationen and Stakeholder Types***

In our further analysis, we were interested to determine whether there were significant differences across Gebietskooperationen or across stakeholders. To compare differences statistically, we used Kruskal-Wallis test statistics, a non-parametric version of ANOVA, due to our small sample size. We compared across Gebietskooperationen and stakeholder groups for each of the variables described in Tables 1-4 above.

Comparing across Gebietskooperationen, there were two significant differences (at the 0.05 level of significance). These differences occurred among two variables in participant views of the planning process: whether the Gebietskooperationen has improved water planning ( $p=0.019$ ), and whether the Gebietskooperationen brought new perspectives into discussions and planning (0.020). None of the remaining items from Tables 1-4 differed significantly across Gebietskooperationen.

To compare across stakeholder types, we classified each of the 31 stakeholders into one of four groups: government agencies ( $n=10$ ), environmental groups ( $n=7$ ), agricultural stakeholders ( $n=6$ ), and service provision associations ( $n=8$ ). There were two significant differences (at the 0.05 level of significance). These differences occurred among the two variables relating to political feasibility: whether the Gebietskooperation participants have learned new information about what is politically feasible ( $p=0.008$ ), and the importance of political feasibility in determining the group's activities and success ( $p=0.006$ ). Environmental group representatives were more likely to report learning about political feasibility than were other group representatives. Environmental group representatives were also more likely to perceive that political feasibility is important in determining the group's activities and success (100% of these respondents indicated "very important", the highest value on the scale).

## **DISCUSSION**

Results of our analyses suggest several important findings. First, there was much agreement that the Gebietskooperationen fulfilled their expectation of bringing new perspectives into planning, and of generating dialogue among administrators, water management stakeholders and the public. However, these benefits were not widely seen as leading to improvements in implementing water measures, or to improving water quality. Second, respondents indicated



many factors were somewhat influential in determining Gebietskooperation activities and accomplishments, most of all financial resources, followed by the interests of stakeholders.

Third, a majority of respondents perceived benefits from their participation. The most common individual benefits were in developing new contacts and strengthening existing contacts (network building), followed by learning about basin scale planning and what other stakeholders want. Many respondents also indicated their home organization had benefitted from increased exchange of information between their organization and stakeholders in the watershed.

Fourth, participant perceptions are quite similar across the different Gebietskooperationen. Only two questions exhibited significant differences across the three Gebietskooperationen. This may be because the planning processes were led mainly by NLWKN personnel and exhibited similar meeting structures, agendas, and time lines across the three Gebietskooperationen.

Finally, different stakeholders appear to have similar experiences in Gebietskooperationen, with the exception of the role of political feasibility. Environmental group members reported greater learning about political feasibility as a result of their participation, and they also had the highest perception of political feasibility as being important for determining Gebietskooperationen activities and accomplishments.

## CONCLUSION

Across Europe and within Germany, political jurisdictions are experimenting with a variety of methods to incorporate stakeholder participation into water planning under the E.U. Water Framework Directive. In the German state of Lower Saxony, the NLWKN is in charge of developing watershed plans with participation at the local level. This participation has taken the form of Gebietskooperationen, which are structured to include representatives of different interests, such as local governments, service associations, farmers, and environmental organizations. Through a series of meetings over several years, the Gebietskooperationen developed management plans, identified heavily modified water bodies, and created lists of measures to promote water quality.

Our study examined the perceptions of members of three Gebietskooperationen in Lower Saxony. Through a telephone survey we obtained member perceptions of Gebietskooperationen success and individual benefits from participation. Overall, members are most positive about how Gebietskooperationen brought new perspectives into planning, and less positive about whether the process has led to better implementation and water quality. Participants have obtained individual network building and learning about basin scale planning and what other stakeholders want. Although most perceptions were similar across the different types of stakeholders, the environmental representatives reported higher levels of learning about political feasibility and a perception that political feasibility is the most influential factor in determining Gebietskooperation activities and accomplishments.

This study has provided some initial insights into stakeholder participation in water planning. Due to our small sample size, and limited number of Gebietskooperationen under study, much remains to be learned as water planning moves forward to the implementation phase.

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