

Meaningful engagement is important for effective co-creation of knowledge

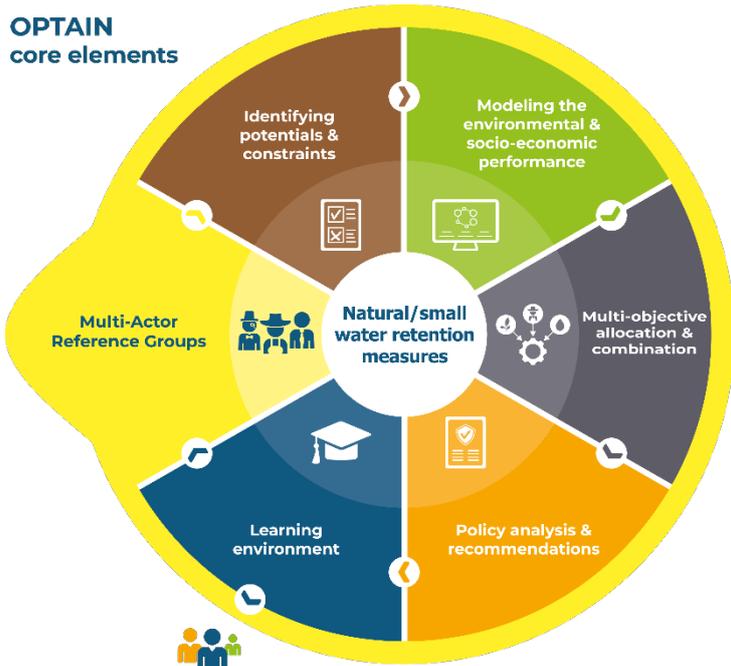
Work Package #1

In OPTAIN, we systematically evaluate the presence and development of meaningful engagement experienced by the researchers (case study leaders) and participants in the multi-actor reference groups.

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The OPTAIN project is about the use of water and nutrient retention measures in solving agricultural and environmental water management challenges. We work in 14 selected case studies across Europe. In order to identify optimal strategies to select, prioritise, and evaluate measures for water and nutrient retention, OPTAIN’s researchers and stakeholders participate in joint fact-finding and co-creation of knowledge. Engagement activities between researchers and stakeholders are planned during all phases of the project.

Typically, lack of knowledge about local context, its actors and their practices represent important reasons why measures are not implemented by local farmers and landowners. The stakeholders are important for providing information about local conditions such as hydrology, soil properties, the socio-economic



Optimal Strategies to Retain Water and Nutrients in small agricultural catchments

situation, trends, local plans, practices and perceptions, regulations and policy arrangements. By including authorities from different governance levels, experts, farmers, landowners and resource management representatives in the case studies, we aim to increase knowledge and ensure better implementation of natural/small water retention measures (NSWRM).

Meaningful engagement is key

In the project we have established or identified multi-actor reference groups (MARGs) in 14 cases across 12 different countries in Europe. To achieve effective co-

creation and trust, researchers and stakeholders need to experience engagement as meaningful. In OPTAIN, we understand that meaningful engagement depends on a perception that the topic is relevant, that there is potential added value, and that there is trust among the actors. Meaningful engagement also requires continuous nurture and attention. Development of trust is typically a slow process, and can easily deconstruct. For the actors to devote their time and engagement to multi-actor platforms, it is important that the activities are meaningful to all the actors involved.

Methods for monitoring engagement

During the first year of the project, all the case studies have established MARGs in their areas. In some cases, partners make use of existing platforms for engagement, while in other cases the MARGs needed to be established from zero. Here, identification of actors, getting to know stakeholders and building relationships are important initial processes. In all the cases understanding the existence, and the development of trust, relevance, and added value is important for identification of successful and optimal water management measures. In particular the presence of trust among actors have been identified in the research literature as a core variable for why actors cooperate or not.

Following this, we have in OPTAIN identified several ways to monitor the existence and development of meaningful engagement:

- observation and discussion with case study leaders on how to promote engagement of different stakeholder groups
- discussion with the case study leaders on their perception of meaningful engagement in the case study
- a survey of the MARG participants on their engagement.

The aim is to facilitate critical reflection and assessment of the different co-creation processes across cases and during the lifetime of the project.

Observation strategies at case study MARG workshops

In April, project members from NIVA (Norwegian Institute for Water Research), which is responsible for the work package on engagement in OPTAIN, joined the second MARG workshop in the **Čechtický catchment in Czechia**, and the **Dotnuvele basin in Lithuania**. Key activities in these meetings were to discuss prioritized indicators, identify most suitable measures and potential localisation. The Čechtický stream catchment case study is located at the Central Bohemian Region of the Czech Republic. Most of the area is agricultural land dominated by cropland. Some of the problems in this area are caused by droughts and soil erosion. The Dotnuvele basin is in the central lowlands of Lithuania. Agriculture production is dominated by winter wheat and winter pasture. There are problems with nutrient runoff and improper use of fertilizers and pesticides, leading to pollution and eutrophication of the water bodies.

Experiences and learning points

In the MARG workshops, farmers, water management and local authorities were present. In both Čechtický and Dotnuvele the case study leaders and visiting researchers presented examples and experiences from other OPTAIN case studies. The participants had several questions about these examples and perceived it as valuable to understand more about how others have solved similar issues such as drought and soil erosion. It also gave the MARG members a feeling that “we are not alone” in having to deal with the challenges and that others’ solutions may give inspiration.

The co-creation processes were facilitated by large maps of the catchment, where participants together identified where different problems are most severe, where measures could be placed, and where they should not be implemented. It was an engaging challenge which revealed that most stakeholders were both knowledgeable about their area and engaged in coming up with solutions together.

Some key learning experiences to be highlighted regarding promoting meaningful engagement from these two workshops:

- The survey of the MARG participants revealed that the majority of the participants found the topics of the project to be relevant
- Hybrid virtual physical meetings enables participants that otherwise might not have been able to attend to listen in to the discussion and receive information. However, virtual presence challenges an interactive discussion. Additional initiatives are being considered for access to options and exchange of perspectives.
- To ensure meaningful engagement with certain stakeholder groups, contact additional to the MARG workshops may be needed such as visiting national authority offices, or visiting existing local platforms. It is also important to follow-up participants after the meetings to make sure that they stay engaged and informed.

The MARG workshops also provide a platform for stakeholders to meet and discuss other related topics, which may in itself be an added value of participation.

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