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CEJ Convergence Public Participation Needs Assessment of the Municipality of Resen Assessment Report

North Macedonia

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1. SUMMARY

This assessment was conducted as part of the Climate and Environmental Justice (CEJ) Convergence Project, which aims to strengthen environmental governance and participatory democracy across the Western Balkans, particularly in Albania and North Macedonia. The Resen Needs Assessment specifically evaluates the current state of public participation in environmental decision-making and offers recommendations and tools to enhance inclusive engagement in local governance.

In addition to identifying local needs and opportunities, the assessment directly supports EU accession efforts by aligning with key benchmarks outlined in Chapter 27 (Environment) and Chapter 23 (Judiciary and Fundamental Rights) of the EU acquis. It contributes to the operationalization of EU directives on public participation—including Directive 2003/35/EC (public participation framework), Directive 2011/92/EU (Environmental Impact Assessment), Directive 2001/42/EC (Strategic Environmental Assessment), and Directive 2010/75/EU (Industrial Emissions). The assessment findings and proposed toolkit serve as practical instruments for demonstrating compliance with EU standards on transparency, inclusivity, and citizen engagement.

Methodology Overview

The research applied qualitative, participatory, and diagnostic tools across several stages:

- **Desk Review** of environmental frameworks and governance documents to understand the legal and institutional context for participation.
- **Stakeholder Interviews** with representatives from the municipality, CSOs, national institutions, donor agencies, farmers, and youth.
- **SWOT Workshop** (May 30, 2025) analyzing strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats related to civic engagement.
- **Validation Workshop** (July 3, 2025) where stakeholders reviewed findings and proposed ideas for toolkit design and piloting.

Key Findings

1. **Public Participation Landscape:** While environmental legislation formally mandates citizen participation, implementation mechanisms often remain limited in scope and predominantly top-down. More dynamic forms of engagement are typically driven by civil society actors and informal networks. Citizen motivation is issue-specific, often driven by concerns related to livelihood, health, or immediate environmental impacts. As such, participation levels tend to fluctuate based on the **perceived relevance, urgency, and personal stakes** of the issue at hand.
2. **Barriers to Participation:** Systemic challenges include weak coordination, politicization, and tokenistic consultations. Information gaps, economic insecurity, and cultural constraints—especially affecting women and youth—limit engagement. Media coverage is insufficient and sometimes misleading.
3. **Opportunities for Improvement:** Resen's ecological assets, existing partnerships, and donor-funded programs offer platforms for deeper engagement. Digital tools can expand reach, especially among youth and farmers. Successful local examples show that structured, relevant engagement yields high participation.

Recommendations

The report outlines actionable steps to overcome barriers and foster inclusive governance:

A. Transparent Communication & Trust Building

- Develop a communication strategy using formal and informal channels.
- Prioritize interactive formats like workshops and site visits.

B. Inclusive & Continuous Engagement

- Establish feedback loops that show how input is used.
- Expand SEA and EIA coverage and tailor outreach to vulnerable groups.

C. Institutional Support & Capacity Building

- Train municipal staff in facilitation and stakeholder engagement.
- Promote leadership continuity and cross-border cooperation.

D. Financial & Logistical Support

- Secure funding from national, municipal, and donor sources.
- Support CSOs and volunteers with resources and incentives.

E. Aligning Environmental & Economic Interests

- Link participation to tangible benefits (e.g. eco-tourism, climate-resilient agriculture).
- Encourage public-private partnerships for shared stewardship.

Toolkit Testing and Implementation

The assessment identifies four pilot opportunities for testing the Public Participation Toolkit:

1. **Ezerani Park Management Plan & SEA** – early-stage engagement with high community relevance.
2. **LEAP Update (2026)** – structured participation in a formal planning cycle.
3. **Sustainable Tourism Infrastructure Projects** – community involvement in environmentally sensitive development.
4. **Environmental Reports for Tourism Accommodations** – formal entry points for toolkit-supported consultations.

Toolkit testing will involve tailored templates, public invitations, stakeholder-specific outreach, and structured evaluation of feedback integration. These pilots will demonstrate how municipalities can fulfill EU participation benchmarks through practical, inclusive, and transparent engagement.

Summary Insights

The assessment confirms that meaningful public participation is achievable when citizens are informed, empowered, and engaged through structured processes. The forthcoming toolkit offers a unique opportunity to translate these findings into practice, enabling Resen Municipality to serve as a regional model for participatory environmental governance—and to advance its alignment with EU accession requirements.

2. INTRODUCTION

This Report is in the scope of the Climate and Environmental Justice (CEJ) Convergence for the Western Balkan Project, which aims to enhance public participation in environmental governance across the Western Balkans, with a focus on Albania and North Macedonia. Among other, it works to align local decision-making frameworks with EU directives and international conventions, particularly the Aarhus Convention, ensuring participatory transparent and inclusive environmental governance.

Project encompasses three implementation Components:

1. *Component 1: Access to Environmental Justice*
 - Improving governance coordination through national and regional roundtables on environmental justice.
 - Strengthening legal capacity via training programs and legal tool development.
 - Enhancing reporting channels and public accessibility to legal remedies.
2. *Component 2: Public Participation in Environmental Decision-Making*
 - Clarifying public participation mechanisms for environmental policies at the local level
 - Developing participation tools to ensure meaningful citizen involvement in environmental governance.
 - Testing public consultation methods within pilot initiatives, ensuring effective citizen inclusion in public participation processes.
 - Expansion phase—Scaling the refined tools for broader application at the national level.
3. *Component 3: Civic Engagement in Environmental Justice*
 - Strengthening civil society participation in environmental governance.
 - Building institutional frameworks to ensure long-term community involvement in policy-making.

The Climate and Environmental Justice Project support participating countries in aligning with EU environmental governance standards as part of their accession process. Through three interlinked phases—(1) assessment of public participation processes and needs, (2) development of a practical toolkit for enhanced engagement in selected pilot processes, and (3) testing and refinement of the toolkit—the project contributes directly to meeting EU benchmarks for transparency, inclusiveness, and accountability.

Public participation is a legal obligation embedded across several EU directives. The table below summarizes the key instruments, benchmarks, and specific conditions relevant to accession.

Table 1 EU Directives on Public Participation

Directive	Benchmark for Accession	Specific Conditions / Participation Requirements
Directive 2003/35/EC (Public Participation Framework)	Transposition of Aarhus Convention and integration into national law	Applies across EIA, SEA, and permitting; mandates early access to information, comment opportunities, and access to justice

Directive	Benchmark for Accession	Specific Conditions / Participation Requirements
Directive 2011/92/EU (<i>Environmental Impact Assessment – EIA</i>)	Operational EIA procedures with public consultation	Public must be informed early, have access to EIA reports, and be able to influence decisions; legal remedies must be available
Directive 2001/42/EC (<i>Strategic Environmental Assessment – SEA</i>)	Functional SEA system with inclusive consultation	Public consultation on draft plans and environmental reports; comments must be considered before adoption
Directive 2010/75/EU (<i>Industrial Emissions Directive – IED</i>)	Transparent permitting with public involvement	Public access to permit applications and decisions; right to comment and challenge decisions; publication of justifications required

Purpose and Scope

This Needs Assessment aims to identify challenges and opportunities for citizen involvement in environmental decision-making. By analyzing barriers, best practices, and actionable strategies, the findings will inform the development of a standardized Public Participation Toolkit, which will be tested within ongoing initiatives. The Public Participation Needs Assessment Report provides a comprehensive analysis of public participation in environmental governance for Resen Municipality and the Prespa region, based on activities conducted during May and June 2025, including:

- **Desk Review** – Evaluating outputs from the Inception Phase to establish a baseline for analysis.
- **Public Participation Field Diagnosis in Resen**, consisting of:
 - **Stakeholder Interviews** – Designed to capture firsthand perspectives from individuals within the public participation ecosystem, these interviews provided:
 - Profiles – Identifying stakeholder roles and expertise in environmental governance.
 - Perceptions – Understanding stakeholder views on citizen participation and institutional engagement.
 - Barriers & Challenges – Diagnosing systemic, organizational, and cultural obstacles affecting participation.
 - Best Practices & Solutions – Highlighting successful strategies and replicable approaches for public involvement.
 - **SWOT Workshop** – A collaborative platform for assessing strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats related to public engagement, ensuring a comprehensive understanding of local dynamics. *Workshop objectives:*
 - Enhancing citizen participation in local environmental governance.
 - Identifying barriers affecting stakeholders.
 - Exploring solutions to improve public engagement.
 - Encouraging stakeholder collaboration, ensuring environmental and economic priorities align.
 - **Validation Workshop** – A participatory session was held on July 3rd, 2025 in Resen to confirm Needs Assessment findings, review comparative case studies and

engagement strategies, discuss Toolkit Design Criteria, and identify potential municipal processes for toolkit piloting. The Validation Workshop gathered stakeholders from Resen's municipal administration and inspection services; national institutions including the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Water Economy and National Forests; representatives of civil society organizations such as Eco-Guerilla-Prespa and Macedonian Ecological Society; fruit growers and female farmers; youth advocates and students; manufacture representatives and other business actors; and the UNDP (EU for Prespa Project implementation team).

These findings shape the development of public participation tools, including the Toolkit Design Criteria. Additionally, the assessment phase is identifying key processes within Resen Municipality that will serve as testing grounds for toolkit implementation (December 2025 – June 2026), ensuring practical insights and refinement before broader application.

Methodology Overview

The methodology integrates **qualitative and participatory techniques** to capture stakeholder perspectives, synthesize insights, and develop **actionable recommendations**:

1. **Data Collection (May-June 2025)** – Engaging stakeholders through **interviews and SWOT Workshops** to ensure findings reflect **public participation realities**.
2. **Data Analysis (June 2025)** – Synthesizing information to **identify themes, barriers, and enabling factors** for stronger engagement.
3. **Reporting (June 2025)** – Compiling findings into a **structured report**, outlining **recommendations for improving citizen participation** and informing the **Toolkit Design Criteria**.
4. **Validation Workshop (03.07.2025)** – Sharing findings with **Resen Municipality and key stakeholders** to refine proposals.

Next Project Stages include:

5. **Toolkit Development (Sept-Dec 2025)** – Creating **online & offline participation tools** tailored to **stakeholder needs**, ensuring **accessibility and adaptability**.
6. **Testing in Ongoing Processes (Jan-June 2026)** – Validating the toolkit through **real-world applications**, ensuring effectiveness before broader adoption.
7. **National Workshop (May 2025)** on scaling refined public participation tools for broader national application.

3. STAKEHOLDER ANALYSIS

Geographical, Environmental & Socio-Economic Context of Resen Municipality

This contextual analysis serves as a foundation for stakeholder mapping, ensuring that public participation strategies align with local environmental, economic, and governance priorities.

Regional Overview & Key Ecological Resources

Resen Municipality, located in southwestern North Macedonia, is located within the Prespa Basin, surrounded by Baba Mountain, Galichica, and Bigla. The region is internationally recognized for its biodiversity and ecological significance, making transnational cooperation essential for environmental protection and sustainable development. Key Ecological Resources include:

- Prespa Lake – A natural monument and critical habitat for species like the Dalmatian Pelican.
- Ezerani Nature Park – A protected wetland, supporting diverse migratory bird populations.
- National Parks Galichica & Pelister – Essential Forest ecosystems, home to rare plant and animal species.

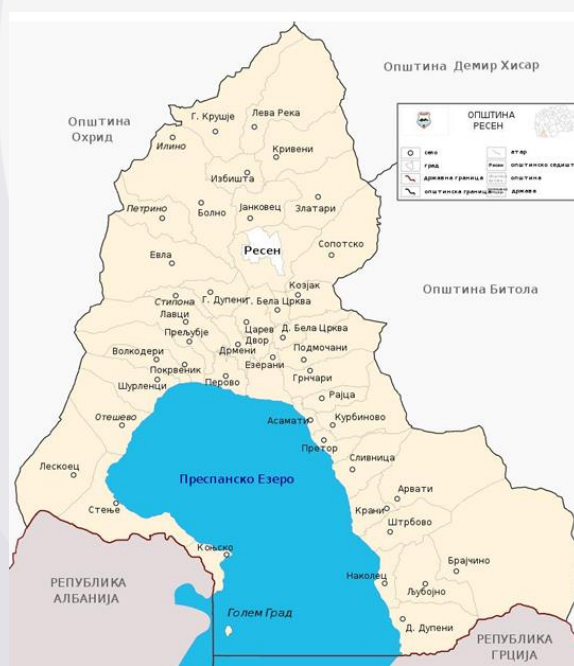


Figure 1 Boundaries of the Municipality of Resen

Economic Development

- Forests are managed by the National Forests Enterprise, with operations regulated by decadal planning to control logging, reforestation, and erosion prevention. Conservation experts advocate for sustainable forestry reforms, citing concerns over unregulated logging and outdated management methods.
- Prespa Basin fisheries follow a Fishing Management Plan, which is implemented by a Concessionaire, but experts warn of unsustainable practices, including overfishing and harmful fishing methods that threaten biodiversity.

- Resen Municipality has 3,500 hectares of agricultural land, with 2,000 hectares dedicated to apple farming. Significant efforts are invested in closed drip irrigation, transitioning over 10-15 years to minimize water consumption and reduce reliance on Prespa Lake water sources and respond to climate change. Farmers are shifting toward integrated production with reduced fertilizer and pesticide use, supported by EU for Prespa/UNDP-led initiatives. The government provides €100,000 subsidies to attract young professionals to rural economic activities, ensuring long-term economic and ecological stability.
- Eco-tourism & agro-tourism are expanding as alternatives to traditional lake tourism, with the EU for Prespa Program funding €600,000 in tourism development grants.

Public Participation in Environmental Governance

In North Macedonia, public participation in environmental governance is regulated by several laws, bylaws, and strategic policies, defining stakeholder involvement, procedural requirements, and transparency mechanisms. Key Laws & Regulations include:

- Law on Environment establishes public participation in:
 - Environmental Impact Assessments (EIA) for individual projects.
 - Strategic Environmental Assessments (SEA) for plans and programs.
 - Issuance of A and B Integrated Environmental Permits¹, allowing public involvement upon stakeholder request.
- Rulebook on Public Participation – Defines procedures and conditions for engaging the public in environmental decision-making.
- Rulebook on Access to Public Information – Ensures citizens' right to obtain environmental data from relevant institutions.

Stakeholder Engagement in Resen Municipality

Stakeholders participate in public consultation processes during the development of environmental strategies, plans, and projects, including:

- Strategic planning documents for waste, water, and protected area management.
- Local Environmental Action Plans.
- Environmental Impact Assessments & Strategic Environmental Assessments.
- Other consultative processes aligned with the municipality's annual plans.

Key Stakeholder Groups

Effective public participation in environmental governance relies on the active involvement of multiple stakeholders, each contributing expertise, resources, and engagement in decision-making processes. Resen Municipality's environmental governance framework includes government institutions, local communities, businesses, and civil society organizations, ensuring a multi-sectoral approach to sustainable development.

¹ Integrated Environmental Permits (IEPs) are regulatory instruments issued under the Law on Environment that set conditions for operating activities with potential environmental impact. Category A permits are issued for large-scale industrial installations with significant pollution potential, while Category B permits apply to smaller-scale activities. Municipalities like Resen are responsible for issuing Category B permits. These permits ensure compliance with environmental standards in industrial and agro-industrial installations.

The following stakeholder groups were identified and mapped during the SWOT Workshop, where participants analyzed key actors involved in environmental governance and public participation in Resen Municipality:

- **Local administration** – Municipal departments overseeing environmental governance.
- **Authorized Environmental Inspector** – Oversees environmental enforcement.
- **Local communities** – Residents participating in environmental decision-making.
- **Educational & scientific institutions** – Supporting research and policy development.
- **Public utility companies** – Managing waste disposal, water supply, and sanitation services.
- **Energy & telecommunications enterprises** – Overseeing electricity & communication infrastructure.
- **National Forests Enterprise (Resen Branch)** – Responsible for forest management.
- **National Parks** (Galichica & Pelister) – Key actors in biodiversity conservation.
- **Water management communities** – Coordinating irrigation and water resource use.
- **Concessionaire for Fisheries in the Prespa Basin** - responsible for managing commercial and recreational fishing in Prespa Lake.
- **Civil society organizations** – Focused on environmental protection and community engagement.
- **Agricultural cooperatives & fruit growers' associations** – Leading sustainable farming initiatives.
- **Tourism service providers** – Promoting eco-tourism and rural tourism.
- **Industry & local businesses** – Supporting regional economic development.

Profiles and Roles in the Public Participation Ecosystem

Stakeholders were engaged through individual interviews and a SWOT Workshop, ensuring a comprehensive overview of public participation in environmental governance for Resen Municipality and the Prespa region.

Stakeholder Engagement Process

- Individual interviews (May 1, May 5, May 22, May 27, 2025) – Conducted with municipal representatives, CSOs, agricultural stakeholders, international programs, and funding agencies to gather firsthand perspectives on participation challenges and opportunities.
- SWOT Workshop (May 30, 2025, Municipality of Resen) – Brought together municipal administration, CSOs, and additional actors (one member of the Resen Municipal Council, Public Utility Company for waste management, National Forests enterprise branch in Resen, Primary school director and the Director of Galichica National Park), expanding stakeholder dialogue.
- Needs Assessment Validation Workshop (July 3rd 2025, Municipality of Resen), The Validation Workshop convened a diverse group of 32 participants, including municipal officials from Resen, representatives from national institutions such as the Ministry of Agriculture, civil society organizations (MES, EcoGuerilla-Prespa), local activists and community members, fruit growers and female farmers, private sector actors from Swisslion Agroprod and the composting industry, educators, students, representatives from UNDP and the CEJ Project team, and international public participation experts.

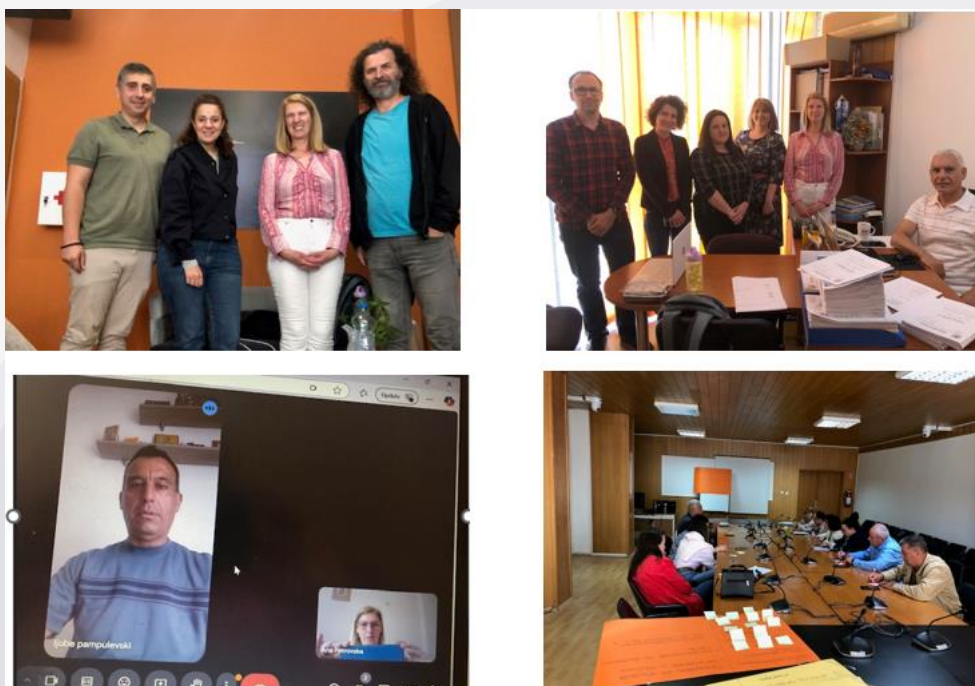


Figure 2 Stakeholder Engagement in Resen (Maj/June 2025) **Stakeholder Profiles & Roles**

Municipal Representatives & Experts

Head of the Environmental Sector, Resen Municipality – Responsible for designing and overseeing public participation processes, ensuring stakeholder engagement and the integration of feedback into decision-making. Actively utilizes the Action Plan for Public Participation, developed under the project "Increased Involvement of Civil Society in Environmental Decision-Making," funded through the Civica Mobilias Action Grants Program and implemented by the Center for Climate Change in Gevgelija in 2017. He played a key role in leading public participation efforts for the Prespa Lake Management Plan (2024–2030) and will spearhead similar engagement initiatives for the Nature Park Ezerani Management Plan, which is currently in its initial development phase.

Municipal & Environmental Experts – team members in the Environmental Sector - Municipal experts play a key role in structuring public participation processes, ensuring environmental regulations are met while engaging local communities in governance decisions. Their responsibilities include:

- Conducting environmental impact assessments (EIA) to ensure municipal decisions align with national policies.
- Reviewing pollution mitigation measures and overseeing B Integrated Environmental Permits.
- Organizing public hearings and consultations, fostering citizen involvement in environmental policymaking.
- Coordinating biodiversity conservation programs, strengthening school and community partnerships.

They support waste management reforms and ensuring sustainable urban development, transparency and civic participation by informing citizens, organizing public hearings, and integrating public feedback into decision-making; manages two protected areas, makes sampling of water quality at the monitoring station located near the settlement of Stenje,

maintains stakeholder engagement, and leads public awareness efforts through annual programs and school-based education.

Civil Society Organizations (CSOs)

Macedonian Ecological Society (MES) – Leads community outreach, environmental education, and sustainability partnerships. Actively involved in wetland conservation projects, MES connects local residents with biodiversity initiatives through school programs and advocacy campaigns.

EcoGuerilla – Focuses on environmental justice, challenging industries on pollution control and advocating stronger enforcement of environmental laws. They are a member of the **Aarhus Center** and actively utilize its platform to access information on ongoing municipal initiatives. Additionally, the Aarhus Centre platform occasionally publishes details about forthcoming public participation processes before the municipality, ensuring early citizen awareness and engagement opportunities. The organization has opposed harmful urban development projects, successfully mobilizing communities against unsustainable shoreline interventions.

Spirit of Prespa & Rural Women of Prespa – Strengthens agrotourism, traditional food preservation, and women's empowerment. Their women-led initiative bridges rural traditions with sustainable farming, promoting local agricultural products while fostering environmental stewardship.

Agricultural Stakeholders

Fruit Growers Association – Serves as a key representative for farmers in municipal hearings, ensuring their concerns—especially regarding hail protection, irrigation reforms, and market stability—are addressed in policy decisions.

International Agencies

UNDP (EU for Prespa Programme) – Supports sustainable agriculture, biodiversity conservation, and infrastructure development. Actively funds tourism infrastructure and farmer training initiatives, ensuring youth and women-led enterprises receive support.

Swiss Cooperation Office (SDC & SECO) – Strengthens citizen participation strategies, ensuring public consultations are unbiased, transparent, and free from political influence. Leads community-driven environmental projects and supports multi-stakeholder collaboration for water management.

SALAR International – Facilitates municipal waste management reforms, helping local authorities improve environmental practices and public engagement.

Key insights from interviews

The interviews and SWOT workshop conducted with municipal representatives (including staff of the Environmental Department, Public Waste Management Utility, Elementary School and one local councillor), civil society organizations, agricultural, forestry and national Park Galichica stakeholders, and funding agencies provided a comprehensive perspective on environmental governance and public participation challenges in Resen Municipality and the Prespa region.

The following identified strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats, are shaping strategic recommendations for enhancing citizen involvement in environmental decision-making:

Strengths

Resen Municipality benefits from rich natural and ecological resources, offering strong potential for conservation initiatives and sustainable tourism development. The presence of a Prespa Lake monitoring station ensures ecosystem tracking and pollution detection, reinforcing environmental research and protection efforts. Municipality has established formal partnerships with scientific, educational and grassroots organizations. Additionally, the municipality has access to international and national funding sources (EU, UNDP, PONT, IPARD III, SECO), supporting environmental sustainability projects. Three information centers serve as hubs for environmental education, fostering community engagement and youth involvement through structured programs.

Weaknesses

Despite well-established environmental frameworks, public participation efforts face significant challenges, including a lack of structured communication strategies, which limits outreach and citizen engagement. The shortage of rangers (only six employed) weakens monitoring and conservation efforts in protected areas. Institutional fragmentation contributes to confusion, inefficiencies, and public distrust, as responsibilities often shift between local and national authorities without clear coordination. Additionally, CSOs struggle with short-term funding cycles, leading to inconsistent public engagement, while financial and human resource constraints impact the quality of services provided by the public utility sector.

Opportunities

Stakeholders identified several opportunities to enhance public engagement and governance effectiveness. Grassroots environmental movements could empower citizens to actively participate in sustainability efforts, while digital media platforms offer new ways to increase environmental awareness and outreach. Legal reforms clarifying institutional roles would help eliminate overlapping responsibilities, improving efficiency and trust in governance. Expanding public-private partnerships could secure long-term funding for sustainability projects, ensuring financial stability beyond short-term initiatives. Additionally, structured participation models and youth-led eco-clubs could translate environmental knowledge into direct action, fostering early involvement and long-term commitment from the community.

Threats

Despite promising opportunities, public participation in environmental decision-making faces several critical threats. Climate change impacts, including biodiversity loss and extreme weather events, pose risks to conservation and resource sustainability. Prespa Lake's declining water levels threaten water availability, biodiversity, and tourism viability. Weak institutional coordination and governance inefficiencies undermine public confidence, reducing participation and engagement. Economic hardships force citizens to prioritize survival needs over environmental advocacy, while low local media coverage limits public involvement in ecological policies. Misinformation and distrust—worsened by the absence of legal penalties for fake news—further erode confidence in environmental governance, discouraging citizens from actively participating in decision-making.

The interview responses provided valuable insights into the public participation landscape in Resen Municipality, offering diverse perspectives on existing barriers, policy and institutional gaps, as well as case studies of both successful and unsuccessful participation processes.

Additionally, interviewees highlighted positive examples of effective public engagement strategies and proposed recommendations for improvement.

A brief overview of stakeholder perspectives is presented below.

- **Municipal Experts:** Municipal representatives acknowledge the strategic value of citizen engagement but face persistent challenges in building trust and conducting effective outreach. Limited administrative capacity and procedural delays are cited as key barriers to participation. Despite these constraints, municipalities lead efforts in environmental compliance, public hearings, and biodiversity programming, and recognize the need for more systematic engagement mechanisms.
- **CSOs (MES, EcoGuerilla, Spirit of Prespa, Rural Women of Prespa):** CSOs operating in the Prespa region demonstrate strong grassroots mobilization and consistently achieve higher levels of citizen engagement than municipality-led initiatives. They advocate for more robust legal enforcement, transparent consultation processes, and meaningful integration of public feedback into policy decisions. Media visibility is viewed as essential for sustained outreach. Many CSOs actively promote eco-tourism and agro-tourism as viable alternatives to declining lake tourism, and call for targeted outreach strategies that integrate economic growth with environmental conservation.
- **Agricultural Stakeholders (Fruit Growers Association):** Representatives from the agricultural sector, such as the Fruit Growers Association, emphasize that engagement is most effective when policies directly impact economic stability—particularly in areas such as hail protection and irrigation funding. They support environmental protection measures, provided these are compatible with agricultural needs, and highlight the potential of contract farming models to stabilize pricing and delivery agreements.
- **International & Funding Agencies (UNDP, SDC & SECO, SALAR International):** Development partners and funding institutions stress the importance of maintaining independence in public participation processes, ensuring that consultative mechanisms remain free from political influence. They advocate for multi-stakeholder partnerships and emphasize the critical role of civil society, institutional support, capacity building, and financial sustainability in fostering long-term participation. Their contributions underscore the need for inclusive governance frameworks that balance technical expertise with community-driven priorities.

A summary of stakeholder perspectives on key thematic areas of the interview framework is presented below, capturing their views on barriers, institutional challenges, engagement strategies, and recommendations for improving public participation in environmental governance.

Perceptions of Public Participation

Stakeholders emphasized the importance of structured engagement mechanisms, acknowledging that citizen consultations often remain procedural rather than impactful, underscoring the need for more inclusive participation, particularly for rural communities, women-led initiatives, and youth groups. They highlighted examples of effective grassroots mobilization, such as the Prespa wetland conservation project, where local residents played an active role in monitoring biodiversity threats.

Perceptions of public engagement levels varied among stakeholders, ranging from low to strong, depending on their role in environmental governance. Interviewees noted that citizens are more likely to mobilize when they see direct, tangible benefits, such as financial incentives, improved living conditions, or enhanced health outcomes. Additionally, engagement tends to

increase when individuals are directly affected by issues like pollution, deforestation, or ecological degradation.

Barriers to Public Participation

Most stakeholders highlighted limited transparency and bureaucratic inefficiencies, noting that public involvement tools often serve a symbolic rather than impactful role, discouraging meaningful engagement. Concerns were raised about political influence, low public awareness, and lack of accessible information, which—combined with the complexity of environmental issues and absence of technical expertise—make effective citizen contributions challenging.

Additionally, conflicting media narratives create public confusion, reducing effective participation. Financial instability further affects engagement, as low-income citizens prioritize immediate survival over environmental advocacy. Many participants expressed feelings of powerlessness, believing their contributions would not lead to meaningful change. Legal, financial, and cultural constraints further reinforce participation barriers.

Existing Strategies for Public Engagement

Structured Dialogue Platforms – Community Forums, Working Groups, Economic-Social Councils, and Local Action Groups (LAGs), facilitate stakeholder collaboration, ensuring citizens actively contribute to decision-making through formal consultation processes.

Grassroots & Targeted Outreach – Focuses on direct engagement, trust-building, and mobilization, fostering stronger local participation and community-driven initiatives.

Capacity-Building & CSO Empowerment – Provides funding and strategic support, helping civil society organizations (CSOs) expand advocacy efforts, awareness campaigns, and mobilization strategies, ensuring the long-term sustainability of participatory initiatives.

Youth & Volunteer Engagement – Encourages community mobilization, promoting sustainability and local environmental initiatives through youth-led programs and volunteer-driven projects.

Regional Meetings & Accessibility – Held in multiple locations, improving citizen accessibility to participation mechanisms, ensuring wider community representation in environmental governance discussions.

Institutional and Policy Challenges

Public participation in environmental governance is regulated at the national level, but municipalities struggle with implementation due to administrative inefficiencies and weak inter-agency coordination. While legal frameworks mandate participation, engagement is often limited to a single public hearing, reducing citizen influence in decision-making.

Stakeholders highlight the need for early and continuous engagement, stronger institutional independence, and clearer enforcement mechanisms to improve credibility. Strategic Environmental Assessments (SEAs) are legally required, but not always mandatory, leading to frequent avoidance and environmental risks.

Recommendations for Strengthening Public Participation

Transparent Communication & Trust-Building

- Develop a structured communication strategy tailored to Resen Municipality's diverse stakeholder groups, ensuring clear, accessible, and inclusive engagement.
- Strengthen media collaboration, leveraging local outlets, community platforms, and multilingual content to counter misinformation and amplify outreach.
- Prioritize interactive participation formats, moving beyond formal hearings to hands-on workshops, digital consultations, and direct engagement efforts.

Institutional Capacity & Leadership Stability

- Ensure municipal officers, environmental inspectors, and community leaders have the expertise and resources to facilitate participation.
- Minimize leadership disruptions, as frequent changes hinder long-term initiatives.
- Implement institutional reforms to clarify roles, eliminating overlaps and blame-shifting to ensure transparent governance.

Financial & Logistical Support

- Secure long-term funding from international donors, national programs, and municipal budgets to sustain participation efforts.
- Provide consistent financial and logistical support for local grassroots CSOs, ensuring capacity-building and long-term impact.
- Facilitate municipal assistance for volunteers, including transportation, waste disposal, and event funding to encourage participation.

Targeted Outreach & Inclusive Participation

- Leverage existing networks—including youth hubs, CSOs, rural women's associations, agricultural cooperatives, and business groups—to engage diverse stakeholder groups effectively.
- Align engagement strategies with priority issues, such as farmer grants, pollution reduction, and infrastructure projects, ensuring citizen involvement remains relevant and impactful.
- Empower local leaders by recognizing key individuals driving change, supporting grassroots initiatives, and fostering community-driven solutions.

Continuous & Inclusive Engagement

- Move beyond the current practice of single public hearings by introducing ongoing consultations, allowing citizens to provide feedback throughout the decision-making process.
- Establish structured engagement models that ensure citizen input is documented, reviewed, and meaningfully integrated into policy reforms.
- Require mandatory Strategic Environmental Assessments (SEAs) to enhance transparency and accountability in environmental policymaking.

Strengthening Agricultural & Economic Stability

- Support contract farming models, ensuring price stability and market predictability for growers, fostering economic security and long-term engagement.

- Promote public-private partnerships, integrating economic sustainability with environmental governance to ensure mutual benefits for businesses and communities.

4. ASSESSMENT OF CURRENT PRACTICES

Public participation in Resen Municipality plays a critical role in environmental governance and decision-making, yet faces significant challenges in implementation. While legal frameworks mandate citizen involvement, engagement is often limited to formal hearings without ongoing consultation, leaving residents disempowered and unable to influence key processes. Institutional fragmentation, trust deficits, and inadequate outreach strategies further hinder participation, especially in rural and economically disadvantaged communities. However, growing grassroots movements, structured communication strategies, and digital engagement tools present valuable opportunities to enhance inclusive decision-making, ensuring sustained public involvement and policy impact.

Status of citizen participation in Resen.

Public participation in Resen Municipality is perceived differently across stakeholders, depending on their engagement methods and outreach strategies. While legal frameworks support public involvement, actual participation varies from low to moderate, with CSO-led initiatives generally fostering stronger engagement than municipal processes.

Existing Tools and Approaches Used by the Municipality of Resen

The Municipality of Resen has adopted a structured approach to public participation through its **2017 Action Plan for Environmental Decision-Making**, developed with support from CIVIKA Mobilitas and the Center for Climate Change Gevgelija. This plan outlines several tools and modalities currently in use to inform, consult, and involve citizens in environmental governance:

- **Information Dissemination Tools**
 - Public announcements and printed materials
 - Local media engagement
 - Distribution of accessible environmental data to raise awareness
- **Consultation Mechanisms**
 - Public forums and hearings
 - Stakeholder meetings with civil society organizations and local experts
 - Feedback collection during project planning and environmental assessments
- **Consensus-Building Techniques**
 - Facilitated workshops to identify shared priorities
 - Use of working groups composed of municipal staff, CSOs, and technical consultants
- **Evaluation and Follow-Up**
 - Mechanisms for collecting public comments and reporting back on how input was used
 - Defined phases for planning, analysis, revision, and implementation, each with measurable goals

While the Action Plan reflects a clear institutional commitment to public participation, its practical uptake has been uneven. The Head of the Environmental Department has demonstrated strong enthusiasm for its implementation; however, awareness of the document among other municipal staff remains limited. As a result, the plan has not yet been

fully integrated into day-to-day procedures and risks becoming one of several strategic documents that remain underutilized. In practice, public engagement continues to rely primarily on conventional methods—such as announcements on the municipal website, invitations via email and regular post, and occasional phone calls to encourage attendance.

This presents a timely opportunity to revitalize and operationalize Resen's participatory tools through the CEJ project, which offers targeted resources and technical support to strengthen inclusive engagement mechanisms and embed them into municipal practice.

Majority View: Limited Citizen Engagement

- Public participation remains low to moderate, with citizens hesitant to contribute to municipal-led processes due to distrust in local institutions and limited opportunities for meaningful involvement.
- Engagement is highly dependent on issue relevance, with financial incentives increasing involvement, while heritage conservation and water management attract less attention.

Key Challenges Affecting Participation

- Institutional pressure, lack of transparency, and complex municipal procedures discourage citizen involvement. Many residents feel uninformed about their rights or fear repercussions from activism, reducing participation rates.
- Limited invitations to public hearings further exclude residents, pushing them to rely on personal connections for information rather than formal engagement channels.

Differing Stakeholder Perceptions

- UNDP and MES perceive participation as strong, largely due to their extensive field activities, where direct citizen interaction and localized engagement drive participation.
- Other stakeholders view participation as medium to low, reflecting municipal inefficiencies, outreach gaps, and trust deficits in formal participation mechanisms.

Donor Perspective: CSO-Led Engagement Success

- International donors consider their outreach strategies highly effective, as they engage citizens through CSOs rather than municipal channels, building trust and ensuring higher participation rates.
- Environmental and social projects led by CSOs achieve greater public involvement, highlighting the need for municipalities to adopt similar grassroots-driven approaches.

Illustrative Discussions: Citizen Participation in Action

- EU for Prespa Programme – Citizens actively shaped its scope and priorities, contributing to €13.7 million in interventions, showcasing effective engagement models.
- Farmer Training & Grant Scheme² – 150 farmers applied, with 87 selected after attending mandatory training sessions, demonstrating the success of targeted participation efforts.
- Fire Fighting Station Redevelopment – Residents helped design the multi-functional space within the renovated station, reflecting community-driven decision-making.

² This training and grant scheme forms part of the EU for Prespa project, supporting local capacity building and sustainable development initiatives in the region [EU for Prespa - Restoration of natural resources and enhancing sustainable agriculture and tourism | United Nations Development Programme](#)

Trends and motivations

Public participation in environmental initiatives in Resen Municipality varies based on awareness levels, perceived benefits, and urgency of issues. While some citizens actively engage in conservation and sustainability, others remain disengaged due to limited understanding or immediate impact.

Motivations for Citizen Participation

- **Issue-Specific Engagement** – Citizens mobilize when directly affected by pollution, deforestation, or ecological degradation, though low awareness of broader environmental concerns limits long-term activism.
- **Personal Benefits & Direct Advantages** – Participation increases when individuals see tangible benefits, such as financial incentives, cleaner surroundings, and improved health. Economic stability, subsidies, and direct livelihood benefits significantly influence engagement levels.
- **Environmental Awareness & Urgency** – Growing concerns over Prespa Lake's decline and forest restoration efforts have heightened public involvement in conservation activities, encouraging urgent action.
- **Health Concerns & Public Action** – Waste management failures, air pollution, and landfill projects drive activism, particularly when citizens fear long-term health risks for themselves and their families.
- **Municipal Communication & Transparency** – Regular updates from local authorities improve early engagement in environmental discussions, reinforcing the need for open dialogue and accessible information.

Sector-Specific Methods of Engagement

Municipality's Environmental Sector – Organizes public hearings, integrates citizen feedback into policy, and leads public awareness programs, though engagement remains limited.

Macedonian Ecological Society (MES) – Enhances environmental awareness through education, direct communication, and accessibility via local offices and school programs.

EcoGuerilla – Mobilizes citizens by offering accessible information, fostering activism among youth, and facilitating public discussions with authorities.

Fruit Growers – Support municipal sustainability initiatives when aligned with their interests, including water conservation, pesticide reduction, and climate adaptation strategies that improve efficiency and agricultural resilience. Their participation is driven by:

- Learning opportunities to enhance farming techniques and efficiency.
- Access to modern equipment to improve productivity and reduce resource waste.
- Increased yield through optimized agricultural methods.
- Climate adaptation strategies to ensure long-term sustainability and resilience.

Rural Women & Spirit of Prespa – Strengthen eco-tourism participation, advocate for women's inclusion in planning, and expand networking opportunities for sustainable tourism; advocate for greater transparency in municipal planning, ensuring policy inclusion in Ezerani Nature Park management, expanding regional ecotourism, and improving market access through international fairs. Their involvement is focused on:

- Policy inclusion—Ensuring participation in Ezerani Nature Park management discussions to contribute expertise.

- Sustainable tourism development—Leveraging nature-friendly tourism (e.g., birdwatching, astronomy-based tours) to boost regional ecotourism.
- Business growth—Expanding market access and networking opportunities at international fairs, strengthening local tourism visibility.

UNDP-Led Engagement – Uses traditional communication tools, such as websites, social media, and sponsored posts, achieving high farmer participation despite limited outreach strategies.

Swiss Cooperation Office (SDC & SECO)– Institutionalizes Community Forums, ensuring structured citizen involvement in municipal planning.

Salar International³ – Strengthens municipal-CSO collaboration through workshops, forums, and consultations, aligning governance actions with community needs.

Trends in Engagement

Stakeholders hold varying perspectives on public participation trends in Resen Municipality, shaped by their level of direct engagement, outreach strategies, and institutional involvement. While UNDP and MES perceive strong participation due to their field activities, others report medium to low engagement, citing trust deficits, administrative barriers, and inconsistent citizen involvement in municipal-led initiatives.

Positive Trends:

- MES activities have improved citizen involvement through education and direct outreach;
- UNDP states that Resen’s long-standing tradition of civic engagement has been strengthened by donor-driven projects (UNDP, SDC, EU, Sweden). Citizen awareness & proactive involvement continue to grow, with farmers showing high commitment in surveys, impressing experts with their depth of engagement.

Stagnation in Participation:

- While engagement remains steady, municipal experts note limited growth, suggesting a need for new engagement strategies.
- EcoGuerilla’s high school activism has seen growth, though long-term retention remains a challenge;

Declining Involvement

- Upcoming Ezerani Nature Park consultations expect low turnout due to youth migration and civic disengagement.
- Challenges for Fruit Growers – National-level gaps limit structured waste management, causing disengagement among farmers struggling to dispose of chemical waste sustainably.
- International Observations – Stakeholders report a steady decline in civic engagement since the Colorful Revolution (2016), reflecting political fatigue and reduced public impact perception.

Case studies of successful and unsuccessful participation.

Successful Public Participation Processes

Rescue of Prespa Lake Coordination Meeting (2020)

³ SALAR International is a **publicly owned company** affiliated with the **Swedish Association of Local Authorities and Regions (SALAR)**.

Overview: A large-scale engagement initiative involving 150+ participants, including ministries, CSOs, activists, and media, aimed at addressing Prespa Lake's environmental decline.

Key Achievements: Led to the creation of the Prespa Park Management Committee, a trilateral body involving North Macedonia, Albania, and Greece, and secured EU financial support for conservation efforts.

Reasons for Success: Broad stakeholder involvement, high-level coordination, strong international commitment, and media coverage ensured policy impact and funding allocation.

Brick Factory "A" Integrated Environmental Permit Revision (2018)

Overview: A series of six meetings, with the mayor attending, culminating in a large plenary meeting with 200+ participants, focusing on air pollution from Nova Sloga brick factory.

Key Achievements: Raised awareness of public health risks, mobilized strong citizen engagement, and pressured factory management to implement temporary pollution abatement measures.

Reasons for Success: Citizen pressure, strong local leadership (EcoGuerilla), extensive media coverage, and sustained advocacy ensured short-term improvements. However, national authorities remained disengaged, and once public pressure subsided, the installation no longer met the environmental requirements of its A Integrated Permit, allowing pollution levels to rise again.

Strategic Environmental Assessment for the Prespa Lake Monument of Nature Management Plan (2024)

Overview: Efforts to engage the public in the SEA process for Prespa Lake's Monument of Nature Management Plan faced significant formal barriers, limiting citizen participation.

Key Challenges: Formal invitations did not attract attention, limited awareness hindered engagement, and scepticism toward the planning process discouraged involvement.

Lessons Learned: simplified procedures, creative engagement methods, and structured public participation formats to secure stronger environmental oversight.

UNDP Farmer Training Initiative (2024-2025)

Overview: A structured training program where 150 farmers attended six-hour daily sessions led by agricultural experts, covering irrigation timing, soil assessment, and fertilizer use.

Key Achievements: Farmers highly rated the program, adopting sustainable practices, improving soil conservation, and boosting productivity.

Reasons for Success: Practical learning, sector-specific engagement, expert facilitation, and alignment with farmers' economic interests ensured high participation rates.

Environmental Education for Children (Ongoing)

Overview: A participatory program involving 200+ students through workshops, field trips, game-based learning, and interactive educational formats.

Key Achievements: Strengthened environmental awareness among youth, integrated schools and educators (PONT), and achieved strong media coverage via TV programs and social media.

Reasons for Success: Engaging formats, youth-friendly communication strategies, institutional partnerships, and continuous demand for activities ensured sustained participation.

Apple Farming & Pesticide Reduction Initiative (2015–Ongoing)

Overview: A long-term engagement effort where 200–300 farmers adopted climate-adaptive pest control strategies, supported by seven agro-meteorological stations monitoring weather conditions and pest timing.

Key Achievements: Improved agricultural sustainability, reduced pesticide use, and enhanced resilience in apple farming despite limited media attention.

Reasons for Success: Long-term commitment, scientific backing, climate adaptation benefits, and direct farmer involvement ensured high retention rates.

Unsuccessful Public Participation Processes: Lessons from Resen and Beyond

Despite multiple initiatives aimed at strengthening public involvement, several cases illustrate the challenges and limitations of civic engagement in practice:

- **Wet Meadows Management** suffered from initial community skepticism and a lack of trust in formal events. Only through field visits and informal contact did participation levels improve.
- **EcoGuerilla's Efforts** faced constraints due to limited time and resources. Overreliance on social media, coupled with a lack of ecological expertise and educational content, hindered deeper engagement.
- **Strategic Environmental Assessments and the Local Waste Management Plan** saw poor turnout due to formalized invitations, low public awareness, and skepticism toward long-term policy planning. The spread of misinformation and information overload further discouraged involvement.
- A **2024 Waste Management Awareness Event** was marked by minimal participation from residents and businesses. Despite solid preparation, public distrust and a mismatch with community priorities led to protests against the proposed landfill in Novaci.
- **Apple Farmer Compensation in Resen** revealed deeper institutional failures: delayed payments over several years, municipal inefficiencies, and lack of coordination across responsible bodies left many farmers in financial hardship, despite significant media attention.
- In **Maleshevo**, misinformation around forest use restrictions triggered public backlash against the protected area designation. Although institutions clarified that opposition stemmed from enforcing logging regulations, media narratives focused on controversy.
- The **Bitola Waste Management Plan** excluded public dialogue altogether, with municipal authorities avoiding participation out of fear of opposition. This led to weak support and disconnect between policy and public needs.

Root Causes of Unsuccessful Engagement:

- *Rigid formal formats* alienate citizens who respond better to informal, trust-building interactions.
- *Misinformation and public distrust*—driven by fragmented communication—undermine institutional credibility.
- *Institutional inefficiencies*, including delayed government action and poor inter-agency coordination, frustrate citizens.
- *Limited media engagement* hampers visibility for awareness-raising efforts, while conflict and protest dominate coverage.
- *Low relevance perception* leads to disengagement from issues like conservation and planning, while health-related risks more easily mobilize the public.

Key Conclusions & Lessons Learned

CSOs Drive Engagement – CSO-led initiatives consistently achieve higher participation than municipal-led processes.

Financial Backing Matters – Structured, donor-supported programs ensure long-term engagement and sustainability.

Topic-Driven Participation – Citizens engage more actively in projects with direct benefits (e.g., farmer grants, pollution concerns).

Citizen Awareness is Crucial – Limited understanding of rights leads to reactive engagement, highlighting the need for early education.

Media Partnerships Influence Visibility – Strong media involvement amplifies outreach, while low coverage reduces engagement.

Reflections from Resen and Comparative European Contexts

The case studies from Resen highlight the vital importance of context-responsive public participation—one that recognizes the interplay between local leadership, institutional capacity, topic relevance, and communication strategy. While some efforts generated meaningful impact and high citizen engagement, others revealed persistent barriers such as institutional inertia, public skepticism, and exclusionary communication formats.

These experiences resonate with broader European efforts to make participation more inclusive—particularly for groups that are often “further away” from decision-making processes.

Public Participation for All – Reflections from French Practice

Reaching out to audiences that are “further away” from public space, thus from participation, is tricky. Mistrust towards decision-makers and institutions is usually higher and social and professional background can prevent effective participation. Moreover, legitimacy to participate and speak in public are less present. In France, a significant part of the population feels despised by representatives and some of them, while interviewed, comment on citizen participation as a communication act, with no impact on decision making⁴. The following case shows actions and limits to this value of inclusion.

Public participation on Nuclear plant in the Bugey

Within the public debate on a nuclear plant in Bugey, the debate team, faithful to the Commission Nationale du Débat Public⁵ (CNDP’s) value of inclusion, sought to ensure that as many audiences as possible, including those called “estranged publics”, could be informed and participate. The approach aims to guarantee an inclusive debate, regardless of the method used. This ambition is based on two pillars: accessibility (of information, spaces, and exchanges) and the implementation of specific measures enabling everyone, including those who feel “illegitimate or not concerned,” to exercise their right to speak.

To meet this challenge, a co-construction approach with local actors, grassroots organizations, and their audiences was favoured. Within this framework, several measures were taken:

- The creation and use of a guide for the debate team: “Rules for the inclusion of marginalized/invisible audiences in the EPR2 BUGEY debate”

⁴ Bresson, S. (2022). *Rendre compte des difficultés de la participation citoyenne*. In *Les déconvenues de la participation citoyenne: Pratiques urbaines, pouvoirs et légitimités*. Presses Universitaires François Rabelais. Available at: <https://shs.hal.science/halshs-04286040v1/document>

⁵ The Commission Nationale du Débat Public (CNDP) is an independent French authority responsible for ensuring public participation in major development and environmental projects. It guarantees transparency, inclusivity, and democratic debate by organizing consultations and providing guidance on participatory methods.

- The drafting of an Easy-to-Read and Easy-to-Understand (FALC) document and its distribution to a large number of social centers⁶
- The organization of two mobile debates (public participation in the street) in areas designated as “Priority Neighborhoods for Urban Policy” (QPPV) in Ambérieu-en-Bugey and Oyonnax.

However, despite a proactive approach based on tools, formats, and methods that allowed everyone to express themselves and be heard, **certain measures could not be implemented**:

- Work was initiated in collaboration with the Le Lavoir Social Centre in Ambérieu-en-Bugey and the relevant city services. Following several preparatory meetings and the dissemination of information, an immersion day at the project site was scheduled. However, the event had to be cancelled due to low public turnout..
- A second specific initiative had also been planned with the Bourg-en-Bresse prison. Despite several meetings and the implementation of a suitable program with a service provider, the workshop could not be organized due to a lack of registrations.

Why didn’t this project go as foreseen? Through the next example, we will see some differences in approaches that will lead us to recommendations for public participation with a focus on participation of the “voiceless people”.

Best EU and French practices: Phoenix inclusion group

Participation in the debate with and for audiences considered distant from decision-making was organized through an inclusion group in Normandy and Hauts-de-France within “La mer en débat” (The Sea in Debate), in partnership with the European H2020 Phoenix project. This group **co-develop tools and methods** for the participation of audiences considered to be distant from decision-making. They created a toolkit. However, in order to make this happen, time and trust are the most essential factors.

Indeed, in the summer of 2023, the debate team, in association with Res Publica, the French manager of the European project, contacted social centers and other social associations in the regions concerned. This dialogue led to the formation of a diverse group of 25 people, varying in age and experience (volunteers, employees, or users of facilities) and coming from the three regions near the northern coast: Normandy, Hauts-de-France, and Ile-de-France.

The group had three objectives: to gather the views of people who are distant from the public debate despite their geographical proximity, to enable the public debate to spread to the territories concerned, and to strengthen citizen participation and empowerment.

At the end, the participants of the inclusion group organized initiatives in their territories through tailor-made resources and tools. They collected voices of residents from working-class neighbourhoods or vulnerable communities, such as:

- The “funny party” on the sea in Dunkirk on January 30 brought together around a 100 people with disabilities and young people who had dropped out of school.
- The territorial assembly of social centers in Pas-de-Calais brought together around 50 people on two occasions in February and March 2024.

⁶ In the French context, *social centers* (centres sociaux) are community-based institutions that promote social cohesion and civic engagement, particularly in underserved neighborhoods. They offer services such as family support, education, and public dialogue, and often serve as key partners in inclusive participation initiatives.

- A citizens' breakfast on the sea was held on March 27 at the Henri Matisse social center in Calais brought together 20 people.
- A day of discussions at the Dorothy café on April 7 brought together around 20 people.
- The sea festival organized by the Oxygène association on April 13 in Neuville-les-Dieppe reached around 50 people.

Accountable outcomes are as follows: more than 150 people coming from vulnerable communities were involved in the process and became “ambassadors” in their neighbourhood. Their contributions and arguments were taken into account in the public report of the debate, which was given to the State. This strong participation was achievable thanks to best practices and recommendations made by the participants themselves during a participatory evaluation with pilot leaders and practitioners at the same level as participants (Carmen Bouley de Santiago, Guillaume Guesnon).

Early-Stage Inclusion in Policy Design: Lessons from Estonia

Estonia’s revision of the *Nature Conservation Act (2016–2018)* offers a compelling model for embedding public participation at the outset of environmental policymaking. Instead of limiting engagement to later consultation stages, the Estonian government actively involved **citizens, NGOs, scientific experts, and municipal authorities** from the initial design phase. The process shaped provisions on biodiversity and Natura 2000 sites in alignment with new European obligations. The infographic below illustrates the multi-level coordination that enabled citizen input from the earliest stages:

- **Initiated by:** Ministry of Environment and e-Governance Academy
- **Funding sources:** EU funds (ERDF, LIFE), national budget, international NGOs
- **Public engagement tools:** Workshops, online platforms, and expert consultations
- **Participation scale:** Over 3,000 citizens contributed proposals, with community amendments included in the final law



Figure 3 Stakeholder Participation in the Revision of Estonia's Nature Conservation Act (2016–2018)

This proactive approach demonstrates how combining **early-stage engagement with diverse funding sources** can foster transparent, responsive environmental legislation. It created **shared ownership** of policy outcomes and fostered broad trust in institutions.

Unlike the more challenging outreach seen in Resen or in the Bugey nuclear plant debate, Estonia's proactive strategy allowed stakeholders to co-author solutions—highlighting how **early involvement can increase legitimacy and reduce mistrust**. For Resen, it offers a benchmark for designing future participatory policy processes—particularly when supported by digital tools and inclusive outreach.

Case-Based Alignment with EU Public Participation Requirements in Resen and EU

The Needs Assessment Report presents a series of case studies—both successful and unsuccessful—from Resen and EU member states. These examples provide practical insights into how public participation is currently implemented and where it diverges from EU expectations. By correlating these findings with accession benchmarks, the report serves as a diagnostic and strategic tool for alignment.

Table 2 How Case Studies Support EU Benchmark Compliance

EU Benchmark	Insights from Case Studies	Alignment Contribution
Directive 2003/35/EC (Framework for Public Participation)	Resen examples show partial legal transposition but weak procedural implementation	Highlights gaps between law and practice; informs toolkit design to operationalize rights

EU Benchmark	Insights from Case Studies	Alignment Contribution
Directive 2011/92/EU (EIA)	EU cases demonstrate structured consultation; Resen shows late or limited engagement	Validates need for early-stage participation and standardized procedures
Directive 2001/42/EC (SEA)	Mixed results in Resen regarding stakeholder mapping and feedback loops	Supports development of inclusive consultation formats and visual tools
Directive 2010/75/EU (IED)	EU examples show transparent permitting; Resen lacks clarity and outreach	Reinforces need for accessible permit documentation and public comment channels
Cross-cutting benchmark: Access to justice	EU cases show NGO involvement and legal remedies; Resen shows limited awareness	Justifies inclusion of legal literacy and procedural clarity in toolkit modules
Cross-cutting benchmark: Inclusion of vulnerable groups	Resen examples reveal underrepresentation of vulnerable communities	Informs targeted outreach strategies and inclusive design features in the toolkit

Processes with potential to pilot the use of the public participation toolkit

To ensure effective piloting of the public participation toolkit, processes should be selected based on stakeholder diversity, engagement potential, and institutional readiness. Some key considerations include:

- **Municipal Planning Initiatives** – Projects requiring broad community input, such as urban development, environmental conservation, and infrastructure planning, can serve as ideal pilots.
- **Sector-Specific Engagement** – Programs targeting farmers, and sustainable tourism services providers can pilot tailored participation methods, ensuring inclusive decision-making.
- **Policy Reform Consultations** – Legislative processes that require public feedback, such as local environmental regulations

Given the scope of possible interventions, the most viable testing grounds for the public participation toolkit lie in municipal planning and sector-specific engagement. This alignment ensures that participatory mechanisms are integrated into practical governance frameworks while addressing stakeholder needs effectively. The following UNDP / EU for Prespa initiatives and municipal planning efforts offer potential pilot opportunities:

Overview of EU for Prespa / UNDP Scope of Activities

The EU for Prespa / UNDP program focuses on environmental restoration, sustainable agriculture, infrastructure improvements, and transboundary conservation efforts:

- **Restoration of Natural Resources & Sustainable Agriculture** – Prioritizes biodiversity conservation, pollution reduction, and sustainable farming practices: the latter include modern irrigation systems, machinery upgrades, and automation, which do not inherently require public involvement.

- **EU for Infrastructure Improvements in the Prespa Area** – Covers wastewater collection and treatment in six villages, the Markova Noga border crossing, and solid waste management, including equipment procurement, software upgrades, and capacity-building activities. Formal public participation procedures (environmental impact assessments, strategic evaluations) are likely completed, with projects transitioning to construction and execution. Public input remains limited to field consultations with households affected by infrastructure developments.
- **Transboundary Protected Area Strategy & Plan** – Aims to enhance cross-border cooperation and develop a long-term environmental management framework. However, since the project is in an advanced revision phase, it is not suitable for piloting the public participation toolkit.

Potential Areas for Public Participation Toolkit Piloting

1. **Sustainable Tourism & National Parks:** The Restoration of Natural Resources Component supports National Park Galichica in developing hiking and biking trails connecting Galichica and Pelister. Although public involvement is not legally required, engagement could be opened to residents and stakeholders, as the trails pass through protected national park areas. Environmental Reports accompanying trail alignment and pavement designs present an opportunity for voluntary public consultations.
2. **Tourism Accommodation Development:** the EU for Prespa Project includes grant schemes for constructing sustainable tourist accommodations such as hostels, mansions, refurbished rural houses, and cottages. Since Environmental Reports are mandatory for most accommodations, public engagement could be expanded, ensuring transparent discussions on environmental impacts and site selection.

Considering the cumulative effects of simultaneous tourism infrastructure development, including projects within national park territories, public involvement becomes increasingly justified.

3. **Local Environmental Action Plan (LEAP) for Resen Municipality**–The current LEAP for Resen Municipality has expired, and its update is scheduled for 2026. This provides a key opportunity for the CEJ project to step in and test the public participation toolkit, ensuring structured engagement in environmental planning.
4. **Ezerani Park of Nature Management Plan** – Identified during the Validation Workshop held on July 3rd, 2025, this upcoming planning initiative emerged as a timely opportunity for toolkit piloting. As contractor selection is still pending for both the management plan and its accompanying Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA), stakeholders agreed that early involvement by the CEJ team could enable the integration of inclusive engagement formats—potentially serving as a live testing ground for the Public Participation Toolkit.

5. BARRIERS TO PARTICIPATION

Public engagement in environmental governance faces multiple challenges, shaped by institutional constraints, organizational limitations, and individual-level barriers. These barriers impact citizen trust, transparency, and sustained involvement in policymaking.

Systemic, organizational, and individual-level challenges

Systemic Barriers

- **Limited Transparency & Bureaucratic Inefficiencies** – Municipal authorities often pass decisions without significant public opposition, eroding citizen trust and discouraging active participation.
- **Political Influence & Election Cycles** – Shifting political priorities reduce focus on long-term civic engagement, leading to inconsistent participation efforts.
- **Symbolic Participation & Procedural Limitations** – Some public consultation processes are purely procedural, offering limited real impact, making citizens feel excluded from meaningful decision-making.

Awareness Related Barriers

- **Lack of Awareness & Access to Information** – Many citizens struggle to grasp environmental issues, limiting their ability to engage in regulatory discussions.
- **Disinformation & Misinformation** – Conflicting media narratives and institutional biases overwhelm citizens, reducing effective decision-making participation.
- **Complexity of Environmental Issues** – Many topics require technical expertise, preventing broader engagement without specialized knowledge or educational interventions.
- **Limited Public Awareness** – Many citizens lack foundational environmental knowledge, hindering early-stage engagement in policy discussions.

Individual & Socio-Economic Barriers

- **Financial Instability & Livelihood Prioritization** – Farmers and low-income communities prioritize survival, limiting their ability to actively engage in environmental consultations.
- **Delayed Compensation & Institutional Inefficiencies** – Unresolved financial concerns and slow governmental action erode citizen trust, discouraging participation.
- **Public Disengagement & Mistrust** – Many citizens feel powerless, believing their input will not lead to tangible change, fuelling civic apathy.

Financial Barriers

- **Municipal Budget Constraints** – Public participation is costly, requiring additional funding to expand outreach efforts and sustain multi-stage engagement.
- **CSO Funding Limitations** – Grassroots organizations struggle with financial resources, preventing widespread community involvement.

Cultural Barriers

- **Geographical & Engagement Disparities** – Villages near the shoreline show lower engagement and require targeted outreach, whereas communities further inland possess greater entrepreneurship skills and can be more motivated in learning opportunities.

- **Traditional Gender Roles & Household Dynamics** – Women are gradually improving their socio-economic status within families, yet at the beginning of training programs, many were hesitant to share their knowledge with male family members. This highlights deep-rooted cultural barriers that require structured confidence-building initiatives.

Impact of Demographics on Participation Levels

Youth Migration & Local Engagement – Many young people leave for education, reducing long-term civic involvement in local environmental projects.

Rural vs. Urban Dynamics – Rural communities initially resist engagement, but consistent outreach fosters trust, transforming them into strong allies.

Funding, Communication Skills and Cross-Border Limitations Identified by Resen Municipality

In addition to systemic and socio-economic barriers, Resen Municipality emphasized three strategic limitations that hinder inclusive and effective environmental governance:

- **Lacking National Support for Public Participation Processes** – Municipal officials expressed the need for targeted assistance from the Ministry of Environment and Physical Planning, particularly in securing funding and technical expertise to design and implement meaningful public participation mechanisms. Despite Resen's active involvement in managing protected areas and coordinating environmental initiatives, the municipality lacks sufficient national-level support to scale its engagement efforts.
- **Insufficient Cross-Border Collaboration in the Prespa Region** – While formal trilateral high-level meetings continue to guide the Prespa Park cooperation, municipal actors highlighted the absence of structured technical-level communication. They called for stronger involvement from both the Ministry of Environment and Physical Planning and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, emphasizing the importance of maintaining regular communication channels with their counterparts in Albania and Greece for joint management of shared natural resources.
- **Inadequate Staff Capacity in Communication** – Municipal environmental teams require specialized training in communication and outreach to effectively engage a diverse range of stakeholders—including local farmers, CSO representatives, youth, and regional institutions. Strengthening these skills would improve dialogue, foster trust, and enable more responsive environmental governance.

Challenges Faced by Civil Society Organizations in Engaging the Public

Funding & Capacity Limitations – Lack of permanent staff in grassroots organizations and constrained budgets disrupt community engagement efforts.

Institutional Resistance to Transparency – Some officials resist participatory models, preferring closed decision-making processes.

Media Influence & Public Perception – Sensationalist reporting misrepresents projects, undermining public trust in environmental policies.

6. OPPORTUNITIES AND BEST PRACTICES

Public engagement in environmental governance requires structured frameworks, targeted outreach, and institutional support to foster long-term citizen involvement. Various strategies have been developed to strengthen participation, transparency, and stakeholder collaboration.

Existing Tools for Enhanced Participation

The 2017 Action Plan for Environmental Decision-Making mentioned earlier, provides a foundation for scaling and refining participatory practices in Resen. Several elements stand out as **replicable best practices** or **starting points for toolkit integration**:

- **Phased Participation Framework** The plan defines clear stages—planning, analysis, revision, decision-making, and implementation—each with tailored participation goals. This structure can be adapted for toolkit deployment, ensuring consistency across municipal processes.
- **Multi-Stakeholder Working Groups** The inclusion of CSOs, technical experts, and municipal staff in joint planning sessions demonstrates a collaborative model that can be formalized and expanded.
- **Low-Cost, High-Impact Measures** The plan prioritizes actions that require minimal financial investment but yield significant visibility and engagement, such as awareness campaigns, participatory mapping, and feedback loops.

These elements can be integrated into the forthcoming public participation toolkit to reinforce local ownership and sustainability.

Other Identified Strategies and Tools for Enhancing Participation

The approaches explained further can be categorized based on engagement forms, communication methods, formal institutional frameworks, and capacity-building efforts.

Engagement Forms (Forums, Groups, LAGs, Councils)

Structured dialogue mechanisms ensure citizens actively contribute to decision-making through stakeholder collaboration and organized forums:

Community Forums – Used in EU for Prespa & Swiss-supported initiatives, providing structured spaces for public discussions and project prioritization.

Local Action Groups (LAGs) – Initially USAID-driven, now functioning as independent civil organizations, amplifying stakeholder voices through project activities.

Local Economic-Social Councils (LESCs) – Serve as consultation platforms, fostering broad stakeholder engagement in governance.

Working Groups – Intended for stakeholder engagement, but lack transparency and continuity, limiting their effectiveness.

Grassroots & Targeted Outreach (MES, EcoGuerilla & Citizen-Led Actions)

Direct engagement initiatives build trust, mobilize citizens, and foster advocacy efforts:

MES's Local Engagement with Villagers – Built trust and increased awareness about wetland conservation, emphasizing ecosystem protection and sustainable practices. Through field visits, educational workshops, and direct interactions, MES fostered a deeper connection between communities and their surrounding environment.

EcoGuerilla's Community-Based Initiatives – Integrate eco-actions into all projects, promoting waste management awareness, environmental activism, and trust-building. Youth & Volunteer Engagement – Young advocates mobilize communities, advocating for sustainability and environmental protection.

Fruit Growers Association – Uses social media, email, and personal interaction to engage members and ensure direct participation in key discussions. They use regional meetings – held in multiple community centres, improving accessibility, while critical issues are discussed in municipal halls for maximum participation.

Formal Institutional Strategies (Planning & Policy Frameworks)

Institutional integration ensures long-term sustainability and structured public involvement: **Municipal Public Engagement Plans** – Embedded in waste, water, and nature management strategies, ensure sector-specific outreach.

Capacity-Building & CSO Empowerment (CIVICA Mobilitas)

Strengthening civil society organizations (CSOs) enables long-term sustainability of participatory efforts: provides funding and strategic support, assisting CSOs in expanding advocacy efforts, awareness campaigns, and community mobilization.

Beneficial Partnerships & Collaborations

Public participation efforts rely on formal municipal partnerships, project-driven collaborations, and potential future alliances:

Formal Municipal Partnerships – Institutionalized through Memorandums of Understanding (MoUs), ensuring long-term collaboration with environmental institutions. The Municipality of Resen has established formal partnerships with the Hydrobiological Institute, National Park Galichica, Macedonian Ecological Society (MES), and EcoGuerilla, which help secure project funding and engage stakeholders.

Informal, Project-Driven Collaborations – Established within specific initiatives, focusing on targeted engagement and capacity-building, including:

- UNDP & Agricultural Producers – Facilitates technology adoption and sustainable farming improvements, enhancing crop resilience and efficiency.
- UNDP & Sustainable Tourism Service Providers – Supports eco-tourism infrastructure, accommodations, and market access, strengthening regional tourism sustainability.

Potential Future Partnerships – Recognized as valuable opportunities, awaiting further integration into environmental governance frameworks. Examples include: partnerships between the Municipality and Fruit Growers, Rural Women, Youth Hubs etc.

Technology & Digital Platforms in Participation

- **Increased Accessibility & Efficiency** – Digital platforms streamline public engagement, broadening citizen involvement in policy discussions.
- **Challenges for Rural & Elderly Communities** – Limited digital literacy and internet access hinder technology use, requiring traditional engagement methods.
- **Farmers & Digital Literacy** – Farmers in Resen demonstrate high digital proficiency, enabling better market access, sustainability practices, and climate adaptation strategies.

- **Balancing Digital & Conventional Methods** – Combining digital tools with traditional outreach ensures inclusive involvement across demographics.

Policy & Institutional Support for Citizen Participation

Legal Frameworks – National laws mandate citizen involvement, though implementation varies across municipalities.

Municipal & Regional Initiatives – Resen Municipality has expanded participation efforts, integrating multiple hearings and stakeholder engagement.

Legal Awareness – Legal education and advocacy programs help bridge participation gaps and strengthen citizen involvement.

Challenges & Implementation Factors – Political will, transparency, and sustained engagement are crucial for effective public participation.

Recommendations for Strengthening Public Participation

Enhancing public engagement in Resen Municipality requires a multi-faceted approach, combining transparent communication, institutional capacity-building, financial support, inclusive outreach, continuous engagement, and economic stability.

Transparent Communication & Trust-Building

- **Develop a structured communication strategy** – Tailor outreach efforts to diverse stakeholder groups, ensuring clear, accessible, and inclusive messaging across rural and urban communities.
- **Strengthen media collaboration** – Partner with local outlets, community platforms, and multilingual resources to counter misinformation, amplify outreach, and establish a culture of transparency.
- **Prioritize interactive participation formats** – Move beyond formal hearings by introducing hands-on workshops, digital consultations, citizen-led forums, and proactive engagement initiatives to encourage active discourse and collaboration: *as emphasized during the Validation Workshop, informal settings like fairs, bike rides, and school-led initiatives proved valuable in building trust and reaching communities traditionally distant from decision-making.*
- **Enhance direct citizen dialogue** – Create open-door communication channels with municipal leaders, ensuring real-time responses to public concerns and structured feedback loops.

Institutional Support for Citizen Participation

- Participants during the Validation Workshop raised concerns about “participation fatigue” and inconsistent invitations, reinforcing the need for reliable communication structures and demonstrable follow-through on citizen input.

Targeted Outreach & Inclusive Participation

- **Leverage existing networks** – Strengthen partnerships with Aarhus Center, youth hubs, CSOs, rural women’s associations, agricultural cooperatives, and business groups, ensuring diverse stakeholder representation.
- **Align engagement strategies with priority issues** – Adapt participation formats to topics that directly impact citizens (e.g., farmer grants, pollution reduction, waste management, infrastructure development).

- **Empower local leaders** – Recognize key individuals driving change, offering support for grassroots initiatives, leadership mentoring programs, and locally driven solutions.
- **Expand rural and shoreline outreach** – Differentiate engagement strategies for communities near and farther from the lake, ensuring tailored approaches based on environmental awareness levels and entrepreneurship skills.
- Discussions during the workshop affirmed that locally relevant messaging and personal interactions were often more effective than formal announcements or digital campaigns alone.

Continuous & Inclusive Engagement

- **Introduce ongoing consultations** – Move beyond single-event hearings by establishing structured engagement models, ensuring continuous citizen involvement throughout policy development.
- **Ensure transparent feedback loops** – Develop mechanisms where public input is documented, reviewed, and meaningfully integrated into municipal policies and environmental governance frameworks.
- **Require mandatory Strategic Environmental Assessments (SEAs) and introduce public participation for small scale municipal Environmental Impacts Assessments (EIAs)**– Implement legal mandates ensuring transparency, long-term accountability, and structured participation in environmental policymaking.
- **Expand accessibility in consultation formats** – Provide simplified materials, multi-language options, and hybrid meeting structures to ensure broad participation across demographics.

Strengthening Agricultural & Economic Stability

- **Support contract farming models** – Guarantee price stability and market predictability for growers, fostering economic security and sustained agricultural engagement.
- **Promote public-private partnerships** – Integrate economic sustainability with environmental governance, ensuring mutual benefits for businesses and communities.
- **Enhance climate adaptation strategies** – Strengthen precision agriculture, water conservation initiatives, and pesticide reduction efforts to ensure long-term environmental resilience.
- **Facilitate funding access for small-scale farmers** – Simplify grant application processes, ensuring accessible financial aid for rural agricultural workers.

Institutional Capacity & Leadership Stability

- **Ensure municipal officers, environmental inspectors, and community leaders have the expertise and resources** – Strengthen training programs and knowledge-sharing platforms to improve institutional efficiency.
- **Minimize leadership disruptions** – Address frequent staff turnover by implementing succession planning, leadership continuity strategies, and long-term governance approaches.
- **Implement institutional reforms to clarify roles** – Eliminate overlapping responsibilities and blame-shifting by establishing clear governance structures, ensuring accountability, transparency, and institutional efficiency.
- **Expand inter-agency collaboration** – Strengthen cooperation between municipalities, CSOs, academic institutions, and local advocacy groups, ensuring coordinated governance efforts.

Financial & Logistical Support

- **Secure long-term funding** – Mobilize international donors, national programs, and municipal budgets to sustain participation efforts, ensuring consistent citizen engagement opportunities.
- **Provide consistent financial and logistical support** – Strengthen local grassroots CSOs by offering funding for advocacy programs, volunteer initiatives, and capacity-building projects.
- **Facilitate municipal assistance for clean-up volunteer actions** – Cover transportation, waste disposal, and event funding to encourage public involvement, reducing barriers to participation
- **Introduce financial incentives for participation** – Explore micro-grants, citizen-led project funding, and community-driven investments to motivate active civic engagement.

Institutional Funding Models for Public Participation (France)

Structured funding mechanisms can ensure meaningful citizen engagement. In **France**, when public participation is legally required—particularly in large infrastructure or environmental projects—the process is managed by the *Commission nationale du débat public* (CNDP), an independent body dedicated to guaranteeing transparent and inclusive debate.

These CNDP-led processes are funded through **two distinct channels**:

1. **State funding for neutral guarantors** The French government covers the cost of appointing **guarantors**—independent individuals tasked with overseeing the fairness and transparency of the participation process. These guarantors do not represent any side; they act as third-party facilitators and receive compensation (*indemnité*) for fulfilling this role.
2. **Operational costs covered by the project initiator (or the state for public policies)** The **project owner**—typically an industrial developer—or the **state** (when the process involves national policy) finances the logistical components of participation. This includes:
 - Renting venues for public meetings or consultations
 - Producing and distributing communication materials
 - Covering the work of external facilitators or subcontractors commissioned by the CNDP

This dual model ensures both **independence and accountability**: while the state maintains oversight through neutral facilitators, the project initiator remains responsible for enabling accessible and well-resourced public involvement. It's a structure that embeds participation into the legal and financial aspects of project development—turning civic engagement from a discretionary activity into a regulated democratic standard.

National-Level Support Structures for Participation and Environmental Action in France

In addition to structured funding mechanisms like those overseen by the CNDP, France benefits from **central institutions that provide both financial and technical support** to local authorities—helping bridge capacity gaps and sustain long-term engagement.

The **Agence nationale de la cohésion des territoires (ANCT)** serves as a national coordination body that supports municipalities in designing and implementing inclusive, sustainable projects. It offers:

- **Technical and financial engineering** to help local actors access EU and national funds
- **Training programs** to build capacity in managing cohesion-related initiatives
- **Tailored support** for rural revitalization, digital inclusion, and ecological transition

ANCT's role as a "project factory" enables municipalities to transform local ambitions into funded, actionable plans—often through simplified contractual frameworks and partnerships with regional agencies.

The **Office français de la biodiversité (OFB)** complements this by focusing on biodiversity protection and ecological governance. It provides:

- **Scientific and technical expertise** on species, ecosystems, and environmental risks
- **Funding for biodiversity projects**, including small-scale initiatives in overseas territories
- **Support for participatory conservation**, citizen science, and environmental education

Together, ANCT and OFB illustrate how **national-level institutions can decentralize expertise and resources**, empowering local governments to lead participatory and environmentally sound initiatives. For Resen, these models suggest the value of establishing intermediary support structures that combine funding access with hands-on guidance—especially for municipalities navigating complex environmental mandates with limited internal capacity.

7. TOOLKIT DESIGN CRITERIA

To enhance public engagement, participation mechanisms must be accessible, inclusive, practical, and supported by effective monitoring and evaluation tools. These design criteria ensure structured, meaningful, and sustainable citizen involvement in environmental governance and municipal planning.

The public participation toolkit will serve as a comprehensive, structured guide aimed at facilitating citizen engagement, ensuring inclusivity, and improving participation outcomes. Based on the outlined criteria, the toolkit will likely include guidance documents, outreach templates, engagement methods, and monitoring tools tailored to different stakeholder groups.

Accessibility

- **Simplified Participation Processes** – Streamlined bureaucratic steps, providing clear, step-by-step instructions for citizens to follow.
- **Information Sharing through Water Bills** – Embedding public participation notices and environmental updates in household utility bills to maximize outreach.
- **Publishing & Disseminating Written Information** – Placing public notices, engagement opportunities, and environmental updates in churches, town squares, and green markets, ensuring visibility in high-traffic areas.
- **Community-Based Engagement** – Hosting forums in schools, cultural centers, and agricultural hubs, making participation accessible for rural communities.
- **Hybrid Meeting Formats** – Providing both in-person and digital participation options, ensuring stakeholders can join discussions seamlessly.
- **Multilingual & Adaptive Communication** – Offering translated materials to make engagement accessible for ethnic minorities, older residents, and differently-abled individuals.

Inclusivity

- **Addressing Demographic-Specific Barriers** – Targeted outreach to women, youth, low-income communities, and rural residents, addressing cultural, social, and financial constraints.
- **Gender-Inclusive Participation** – Expanding initiatives that empower women, supporting their increasing role in environmental governance.
- **Geographic Equity in Outreach** – Developing tailored participation strategies for shoreline villages (requiring targeted outreach) and inland communities (leveraging adaptability and entrepreneurship skills).
- **Trust-Building in Sceptical Communities** – Applying MES's and EcoGuerilla's approaches of direct engagement, local advocacy, and personal interaction to increase public confidence.

Practicality

- **Step-by-step guides on environmental assessments**, using resources from the Aarhus Centre⁷ platform to simplify complex procedures.

⁷ [Forms – Aarhus Center – Skopje, North Macedonia](#)

- **Public Engagement Incentives**, such as recognition programs, to promote long-term participation.

Monitoring and Evaluation Tools

- **Participation Metrics** – Tracking event turnout, engagement frequency, and demographic participation breakdown.
- **Stakeholder Satisfaction** – Assessing citizen perceptions of transparency, accessibility, and municipal responsiveness.
- **Impact Measurement** – Evaluating how public input influences municipal decisions, ensuring citizen contributions lead to meaningful change.

Feedback Mechanisms

Digital Feedback Loops – Utilizing:

- **Survey tools** (Google Forms, Typeform, SurveyMonkey) for public feedback collection.
- **Comment forums** (municipal website & social media) for open discussions.
- **Open response platforms** (FixMyStreet, SeeClickFix) to report environmental concerns and municipal issues.
- **Iterative Participation Refinements** – Adjusting strategies based on direct community feedback, ensuring citizen engagement remains relevant.
- **Structured Reporting Systems** – Establishing public documentation that outlines how citizen feedback is integrated into policy decisions, strengthening transparency and accountability.

Complementary Insights from EU Practice: Inclusive Participation Design

Building on local experiences, the following insights drawn from EU practice—particularly the French “Phoenix” inclusion initiative and CNDP-led debates (please see the section on Successful and Unsuccessful Participatory practices above) —highlight critical dimensions for improving accessibility and representation in participatory governance. The accompanying table presents criteria for designing a participatory toolkit that accounts for diverse public needs, including underrepresented and “voiceless” groups.

Public participation in general	Inclusive citizen participation
1. Be clear on the framing of participation: goal, constraints, needs, expected outcomes and possible drawbacks.	
2. Have a clear schedule from the outset: beginning and closure of the project must be defined in advance and shared with stakeholders and citizens. One should respect the schedules of others, of each organisation and give the same level of information.	
3. Identify stakeholders, associations, community leaders and interview them to get a sense of the reception of the participatory process and their needs.	
4. Choose adapted tools for every step of the process: offline and online	
5. Providing information in a balanced way in terms of content and length	
6. Build trust in the information and the process	

Public participation in general	Inclusive citizen participation
7. Think wisely to the venue: symbolic or friendly, one should adapt to circumstances and events: flexibility is important	
8. Build a strong communication plan and implement it to mobilize stakeholders and citizens. Be aware that each stakeholder and community must have a specific communication.	
9. Use every classical communication channel: posters, letters, emails, social network website of the project and the municipality	Go to the neighbourhoods and speak with associations, go to the streets and explain why people would benefit from participation.
10. Compensation and budget for travel (at least reimbursement of expenses), catering	

Gender issues: under-representation of women in public debate and citizen participation

Despite growing recognition of the importance of inclusive governance, **women remain significantly underrepresented in public participatory processes in Resen and elsewhere.** Attendance at public hearings, consultations, and workshops continues to be predominantly male, reflecting broader societal patterns where **public space and civic discourse are less accessible to women.** Several interlinked factors contribute to this imbalance:

- **Cultural constraints and traditional gender roles** often limit women's visibility and confidence in public forums. During early stages of the UNDP/EU for Prespa training programs, many women expressed hesitation to share knowledge with male family members, underscoring the need for structured confidence-building initiatives.
- **Household responsibilities and economic insecurity** disproportionately affect women's ability to engage, particularly in rural areas.
- **Male-dominated meeting dynamics**—where men tend to speak more and occupy leadership roles—can discourage female participation and reinforce self-doubt.

These findings align with broader research on gender inequality in civic engagement. According to the **European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE)**, gender-sensitive public participation requires deliberate structural adjustments, including inclusive language, balanced speaking opportunities, and targeted outreach strategies⁸. The **European Commission's Gender Equality Strategy (2020–2025)** further emphasizes the need to mainstream gender across all EU policies, including civic engagement and governance⁹. In France, the **Agence Française de Développement (AFD)** has adopted a feminist institutional approach, integrating gender considerations into all supported projects and promoting tools such as non-mixed workshops, inclusive writing, and direct outreach to women¹⁰.

Inclusive Practices and Emerging Models

⁸ European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE), *Gender Mainstreaming in France*. Available at: <https://eige.europa.eu/gender-mainstreaming/countries/france>

⁹ European Commission, *Gender Equality Strategy 2020–2025*. Available at: https://commission.europa.eu/strategy-and-policy/policies/justice-and-fundamental-rights/gender-equality/gender-equality-strategy_en

¹⁰ Agence Française de Développement (AFD), *Gender Equality*. Available at: <https://www.afd.fr/en/themes/gender-equality>

To address these disparities, several promising strategies have been piloted in France that offer valuable models for replication in Resen:

- **Neutral and inclusive writing** in public materials to avoid gender bias.
- **Alternating male and female speakers or questioners** during events to balance visibility.
- **Non-mixed workshops and women-focused meetings**, which create safer spaces for women to express views and build confidence.
- **“Out-of-the-room” modalities**, such as household visits, informal gatherings, and mobile consultations¹¹, which are particularly effective in reaching women who may not attend formal meetings.
- **Support for women-led initiatives**, such as those by Spirit of Prespa and Rural Women of Prespa, which combine environmental stewardship with agrotourism and traditional food preservation, offering both economic empowerment and civic visibility.

These approaches align with recommendations from the *Guide de la participation en faveur de l'égalité de genre*, developed by the Institut de la Concertation et de la Participation Citoyenne (ICPC), which compiles tested strategies such as non-mixed workshops, inclusive language, and gender-balanced facilitation techniques¹².

The **EU for Prespa Programme**, implemented by UNDP, has actively supported these efforts by funding tourism infrastructure, farmer training, and women-led enterprises. These initiatives demonstrate that **targeted investment and inclusive design can help overcome cultural barriers and foster meaningful participation**.

Recommendations for Toolkit Integration

To ensure gender-responsive public participation in Resen's environmental governance, the forthcoming toolkit should:

- Include **gender-sensitive facilitation guidelines** and outreach templates.
- Promote **quota-based or role-based inclusion** in participatory bodies.
- Encourage **collaboration with women's organizations** to co-design engagement strategies.
- Integrate **monitoring indicators** that track gender balance in participation and decision-making.

By embedding these practices into municipal processes, Resen can advance both **EU accession goals** and local commitments to inclusive, sustainable development.

Anticipated Toolkit Structure

The public participation toolkit will serve as a comprehensive, structured guide aimed at facilitating citizen engagement, ensuring inclusivity, and improving participation outcomes. It will be modular and adaptable, allowing municipalities to tailor formats based on project type,

¹¹ In Resen, **mobile consultations can be organized through context-sensitive outreach**, including visits to female farmers during cooperative gatherings, engagement with women in local markets or community centers, and the deployment of mobile kiosks or vans to distribute information and collect feedback.

¹² *Guide de la participation en faveur de l'égalité de genre*, Institut de la Concertation et de la Participation Citoyenne (ICPC), 2024. Available at: <https://i-cpc.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/03/GUIDE-DE-LA-PARTICIPATION-EN-FAVEUR-DE-LEGALITE-DE-GENRE-2.pdf>

capacity, and outreach needs—going beyond reglementary procedures while reducing internal resource demands.

Based on these design criteria, the public participation toolkit will likely include:

Guidance Documents – Comprehensive instructions on:

- Public participation processes, legal frameworks, and best practices
- Stakeholder-specific guidance for engaging in environmental governance

Additional guidance elements derived from the discussions held during the Needs Assessment Validation Workshop in July 2025 in Resen:

- Strategies to overcome participation barriers and navigate municipal structures
- Local training on postures and mobilization for municipality team: theory and practice (case scenario)
- Propose a “Local Participation Charter” to the Municipal Council
- Create concern among the population—for example, around waste management’s impact on daily life, health, and surroundings. Connect environmental issues to visible consequences (e.g. mosquitos, foxes, Asian hornets harming bees and harvests)
- Brief guide: How to cooperate and join efforts to make public participation a success
- Create a modular participatory process that municipalities can adapt based on the project, advancing beyond reglementary formats and conserving institutional resources

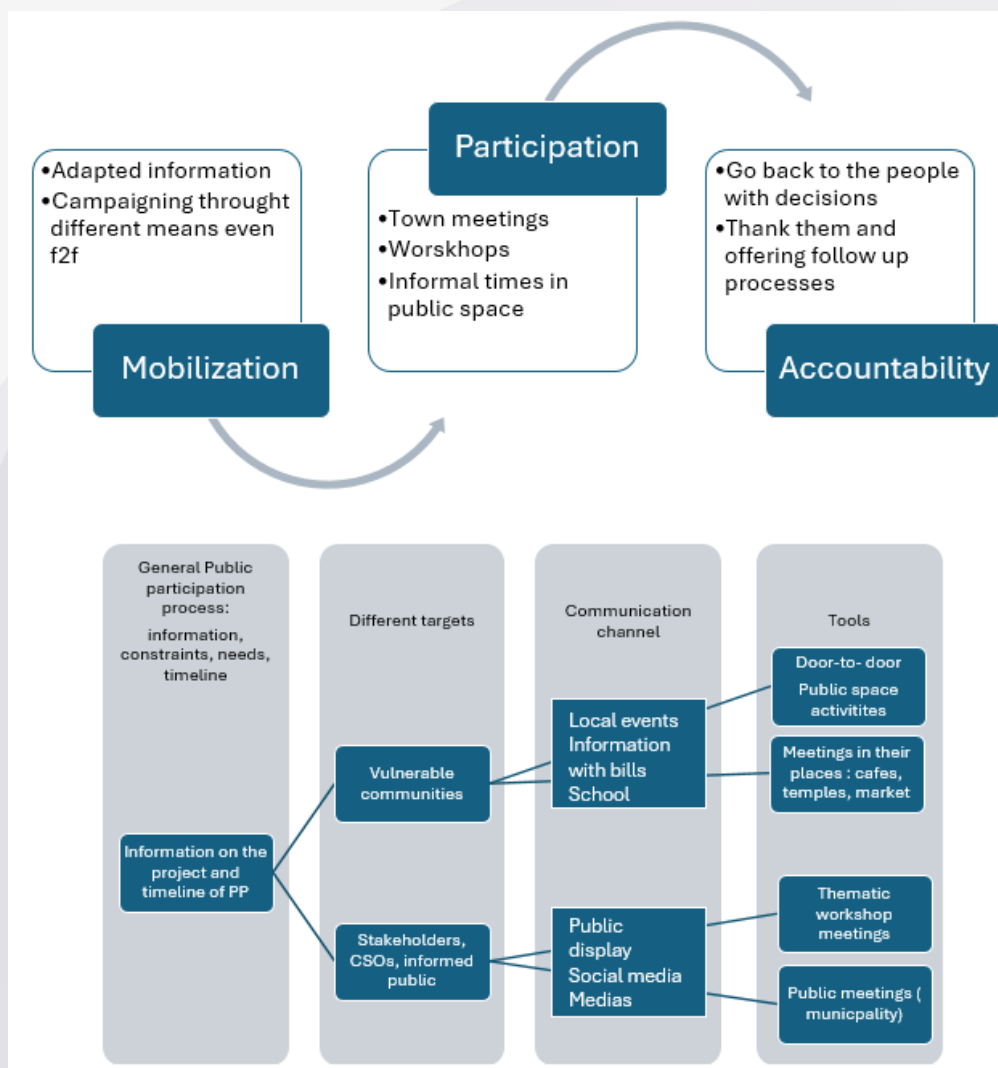


Figure 4 Modular Participation Approach: Three Stages of Engagement

This infographic illustrates three adaptable stages of public participation—mobilization, participation, and accountability—enabling flexible entry points for municipalities and community stakeholders.

Outreach Templates & Materials – Custom communication tools, such as:

- **Stakeholder-specific** invitation templates for farmers, CSOs, women’s associations, and business leaders.
- **Press release formats** for announcing public hearings and municipal engagement opportunities.
- **Community flyers** with multilingual accessibility options.
- **Placement of public notices in informal venues**—churches, schools, town squares, green markets

Methods for Increasing Turnout – Proven strategies to improve participation, including:

- **Use of informal gathering locations** (markets, churches, town halls) for information dissemination.
- **Interactive engagement methods** (digital forums, WhatsApp groups, SMS updates).

- **Incentive-based participation**, offering recognition or other non-financial incentives for active stakeholders:
 - **Social Media Spotlights** – Highlight active stakeholders through municipal social media posts, showcasing their contributions.
 - **Certificates & Awards** – Provide official recognition for citizen engagement, such as certificates of appreciation or honorary mentions at municipal events.
- **Community Leader Features** – Publish interviews or success stories in local newspapers, municipal websites, or newsletters, celebrating citizen contributions.
- **Citizen interviews or success stories** published locally
- **Mapping of structurally absent groups** (due to digital illiteracy, geographic remoteness, language barriers, etc.)

Monitoring & Evaluation Tools – Structured assessment mechanisms, including:

- **Guidelines** for tracking event participation and measuring engagement trends.
- **KPIs** tailored to environmental governance to evaluate effectiveness.
- **Real-time feedback loops** to adjust participation strategies dynamically.
- **Qualitative and quantitative indicators**: number of participants, diversity, satisfaction, actual impact
- **Post-participation feedback and evaluation mechanisms**, including structured follow-up with participants

Strategic Role in Environmental Governance Alignment

The Public Participation Toolkit to be developed under the Climate and Environmental Justice (CEJ) Project is not merely a support instrument—it is a direct response to EU accession benchmarks on transparency, inclusivity, and structured citizen engagement. By embedding the toolkit into two live planning processes in Resen—the **LEAP update (2026)** and the **Ezerani Park Management Plan and SEA**—the project moves beyond theoretical alignment and demonstrates **practical compliance** with EU directives.

Table 3 How the Toolkit and Testing Processes Support EU Accession Benchmarks

EU Benchmark / Directive	Toolkit Contribution	Testing Process Contribution
Directive 2003/35/EC (Framework for Public Participation)	Provides structured formats for early access to information, multilingual outreach, and feedback loops	Live testing in LEAP and SEA ensures operationalization of rights and procedures, not just legal transposition
Directive 2001/42/EC (SEA)	Offers stakeholder mapping templates, outreach strategies, and adaptive communication tools	SEA process for Ezerani Park becomes a demonstration of structured, inclusive engagement aligned with EU standards
Cross-cutting benchmark: Inclusion of vulnerable groups	Integrates gender-sensitive outreach, geographic equity strategies	Testing in shoreline and inland communities validates inclusive design and identifies refinements for broader application
Cross-cutting benchmark: Monitoring and evaluation	Embeds participation metrics, satisfaction	

EU Benchmark / Directive	Toolkit Contribution	Testing Process Contribution
	surveys, and impact tracking	

..

1. RECOMMENDATIONS FOR TESTING

The testing phase will focus on ensuring that stakeholder involvement is structured, transparent, and effective, allowing adjustments to improve turnout and responsiveness. Integrating the toolkit into existing projects will allow for timely, relevant, and impactful engagement.

To achieve this, public involvement processes must be synchronized with project milestones, ensuring that community voices influence key decisions rather than being reactive or symbolic.

Proposed processes (e.g., EIA, SEA, or ongoing project activities)

The following processes have been identified as key pilot opportunities for enhancing public participation through the structured use of the participation toolkit:

Sustainable Tourism Hiking and Biking Trails & National Parks

The Restoration of Natural Resources Component supports National Park Galichica in developing hiking and biking trails that connect Galichica and Pelister. This initiative presents an opportunity to introduce structured engagement, even though legal requirements for participation do not exist.

Public Consultation Approach:

- Environmental Reports accompanying trail alignment and pavement designs provide a formal point for engagement, offering voluntary consultations.
- Given that the trails pass through protected areas, early-stage involvement from conservation groups and local communities is recommended.
- The cumulative effects of simultaneous tourism infrastructure development demand an expanded consultation process, particularly where projects overlap with national park territories.
- Using the toolkit, we will deploy outreach templates, press releases, local partnerships, and direct community discussions to increase visibility and participation.

Toolkit Testing:

- Structured public forums engaging environmental groups, tourism operators, and residents to discuss concerns about ecological preservation and trail development.
- Media partnerships will highlight the importance of balancing conservation and tourism, ensuring clear messaging.

After the final selection of pilot processes, the idea to test tourist hiking and biking trails was dropped due to procedural and substantive challenges. Although trail routes were selected and an Environmental Protection Elaborate was submitted by UNDP, the municipality clarified it lacked jurisdiction to approve the report, as such authority lies with the Ministry of Environment—particularly for trails within protected areas. Considering the project's focus on supporting local-level processes—and not interfering with public participation organized at the national level—it was decided that project resources will be offered only upon explicit demand.

Tourism Accommodation Development

The EU for Prespa Project includes grant schemes for constructing sustainable tourist accommodations, such as hostels, mansions, refurbished rural houses, and cottages. Since Environmental Reports are mandatory, this presents a structured point for citizen involvement.

Public Consultation Approach:

- Environmental Reports accompanying trail alignment and building designs provide a formal point for engagement, offering voluntary consultations before construction permits are issued.
- The cumulative effects of simultaneous tourism infrastructure development demand an expanded consultation process, particularly where projects overlap with national park territories.
- Using the toolkit, we will deploy outreach templates, press releases, local partnerships, and direct community discussions to increase visibility and participation.

Toolkit Testing:

- The design phase of accommodations will be accompanied by environmental impact assessments, ensuring structured discussions on location, sustainability, and visual impacts.
- The toolkit will be used for announcing hearings, publishing press releases, developing outreach methods, and partnering with local media to maximize engagement and transparency.

At a later stage of the needs assessment process, however, structural constraints were identified: each grant recipient is expected to independently prepare project documentation, including environmental reports. This setup risks fragmenting project resources across multiple, parallel public participation processes. Consequently, it was decided not to pilot the PP toolkit within this framework. However, project resources remain available to contribute upon invitation from the municipality.

Local Environmental Action Plan (LEAP) – Resen Municipality

The current LEAP for Resen Municipality has expired, with an update scheduled for 2026. This presents a key opportunity to test the toolkit and introduce structured engagement into environmental planning processes.

Public Consultation Approach:

- LEAP revisions must align with community priorities, ensuring citizen involvement in defining environmental objectives and priorities.
- The toolkit will allow structured data collection from residents, ensuring broad stakeholder participation.

Toolkit Testing:

- Stakeholder outreach will be enhanced using targeted forums, surveys, and engagement platforms, ensuring transparent and actionable participation methods.
- The toolkit will be used for gathering public opinions on sector priorities, resource allocation, and long-term environmental planning strategies.

Ezerani Park of Nature Management Plan and Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA)

The Validation Workshop held on July 3rd, 2025 surfaced a new pilot opportunity for toolkit testing: the upcoming planning process for the Ezerani Park of Nature. With both the

Management Plan and its Strategic Environmental Assessment still in pre-contracting phase, this initiative presents a timely entry point for early-stage public participation.

Public Consultation Approach:

- The SEA process requires structured consultations, offering a legally binding anchor for toolkit-supported engagement.
- Local communities, conservation experts, and shoreline residents have direct stakes in the plan's outcomes, making inclusive outreach essential.
- Using the toolkit, engagement will include thematic forums, shoreline-focused workshops, and dissemination of planning updates.

Toolkit Testing:

- The modular format will support consultations adapted to planning phases—prior to contractor selection and during document drafting.
- Stakeholder input will shape both management priorities and ecosystem protection strategies.
- Toolkit tools (surveys, outreach templates, SEA-specific communication formats) will be tested to ensure broad, transparent and responsive participation.

Steps for applying the toolkit in the selected initiatives.

Now that pilot projects have been identified, the next step is to synchronize public involvement events with ongoing municipal and project activities. This requires:

- **Aligning Engagement with Project Timelines** – Public participation events must be integrated within environmental approval processes, ensuring citizen voices influence decision-making before permits are issued.
- **Structured Public Hearing Process** – The EIA process shall comprise several hearings, requiring continuous stakeholder engagement through guidelines, outreach methods, templates, and press releases.
- **Municipal & Media Partnerships** – Strengthening collaborations with local media outlets to amplify public consultations and toolkit-supported engagement events.

By adapting participation formats, synchronizing engagement efforts, and leveraging structured outreach tools, the public participation toolkit will be systematically tested, ensuring transparent, accessible, and meaningful engagement in environmental governance.

The Public Participation Toolkit represents a key contribution toward operationalizing the principles of the EU Public Participation Directive and the Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA) Directive. By designing participatory processes that are inclusive, transparent, and legally coherent, the project supports the municipality of Resen in moving closer to full alignment with EU requirements. The toolkit not only strengthens procedural integrity but also builds institutional capacity for meaningful engagement—laying the groundwork for long-term compliance and democratic environmental governance.

ANNEXES:

Annex I Stakeholder Interview Reports

Access to Stakeholder interview reports:

<https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/1-fbz5jljeMmNpljDAbmtx3Q9u9rJVLHR?usp=sharing>

Annex II List of participants - stakeholder interviews

Access to the List of participants:

<https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/1Rjh75VM425gMDy-igHjYjCjQ1swzpuUv?usp=sharing>

Annex III SWOT Workshop Report

Access to the SWOT Workshop Report:

<https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/1ToM6MJ2-INhTBJEV9bvZe3m9y5C1MlvA?usp=sharing>

Annex IV List of participants - SWOT Workshop

Access to the List of participants – SWOT Workshop:

<https://drive.google.com/file/d/1vsLa94tTKgV3nDyTW2MEmEpGEzsdOuL/view?usp=sharing>

Annex V Needs Assessment Validation Workshop Report

Access the Needs Assessment Validation Workshop Report:

https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/1Je8kKRk4fdRAfaNdHkS73M_NcVvCKYWe?usp=sharing

Annex VI List of participants - Needs Assessment Validation Workshop Report

Access to the List of participants – Needs Assessment Validation Workshop Report:

https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/1Je8kKRk4fdRAfaNdHkS73M_NcVvCKYWe?usp=sharing