



The right to participate

Public participation in environmental decision making makes governmental actions more transparent to the community, and makes the authorities themselves more accountable to society. The principle of public participation is one of the main prerequisites for sustainable development, as it contributes to better decisions that reflect the real needs of people and the environment. Citizens and civil society organisations should have the opportunity to express their concerns and views to the authorities regarding environmental impacts, and the authorities should take into consideration the needs of society.

Read through the case study below and discuss the implications.



Case study: The new highway

The Ivanov family owns a farm close to a road. The family would like to expand its stockbreeding activities, but recent information about plans for infrastructure developments has raised serious concerns.

“I am very worried about the amount and speed of construction work lately”, says Mr. Ivanov. “There is little left of the once calm and quiet village road. Now they are planning to build a highway here. There will be far more traffic and higher levels of noise and pollution, which will have a negative impact on my stock’s productivity.”



“Plans to build a power transmission line are also alarming”, adds Mrs. Ivanova. “I have heard that electromagnetic waves have a negative impact on human and animal health, and that they even suppress normal plant growth. What will happen to our business then?”

According to the law, the authorities are obliged to involve the public in any decision-making process involving projects and activities related to metallurgy, waste management, industrial production, the construction of dams and roads, mining, the production of energy and chemicals, and other similar activities. The authorities should therefore make their intentions and plans public by disseminating information in an easy-to-understand format and in a timely manner that allows an adequate period for response.

This information should include a thorough analysis of the possible impacts of the future activity on the environment. The procedure for preparing such information is called an environmental impact assessment (EIA).

The authorities are also obliged to organise a public discussion about all such projects. The location, date and time of the meeting should be well publicised in advance. The public discussion should be organised before a decision is taken. The authorities are then obliged to take into account the various views and considerations presented. The decision itself should be based on the principle of general consensus, reflecting a maximum number of perspectives and minimising the potential impact of the future development on people’s health and the environment. Public participation is required not only in the case of new constructions, but also in relation to the development of plans, programmes or policies regarding the environment.