

A Thematic Analysis on the Drivers of Community Participation for River Restoration Projects, the Case of Kerala, India

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Abstract : As local community participation in river restoration projects is increasingly recognized to be crucial for sustainable outcomes, researchers are exploring factors that motivate community participation globally. In India, while there is consensus in literature on the importance of community engagement in river restoration projects, research on what drives local communities to participate is limited, especially given the societal and economic challenges common in the Global South. This study addresses this gap by exploring the drivers of community participation in the local river restoration initiatives of the "Now Let Me Flow" campaign in Kerala, India. The project aimed to restore 87,000 kilometers of streams through the middle-ground governance approach that integrated bottom-up community efforts with top-down governmental support. The fieldwork involved interviews with 26 key agents, including local leaders, policy practitioners, politicians, and environmental activists associated with the project, and the collection of secondary data from 12 documents including project reports and news articles. The data was analyzed in NVivo (NVivo 11 Plus for Windows, version 11.3.0.773) using thematic analysis which included two cycles of systematic coding. The findings reveal two main drivers influencing community participation: top-down actions from local governments, and bottom-up drivers within the community. The study highlights the importance of local stakeholder collaboration, support of local governments, and local community engagement in successful river restoration projects. These findings are consistent with other empirical studies on participatory environmental problem-solving globally. The results offer crucial insights for policymakers and governments to better design and implement effective and sustainable participatory river restoration projects.

Keywords : community initiatives, drivers of participation, environmental governance, river restoration

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