SPARE activities have been focused on the Slovenian Soča catchment area (~ 2300 km²), an Adriatic basin which straddles the boundaries of Slovenia and Italy. The area is sparsely populated with around 120,000 inhabitants. The main water users are fish farms, agriculture and hydropower plants, but, due to attractive nature and well-preserved environment, there is much tourism and recreation (fishing, rafting, kayaking and canyoning).

Actions are undertaken to preserve the river basin’s natural characteristics. SPARE activities want to support implementation of integrated river management and to promote inter-sectoral cooperation.

Soča River Foundation (SRF) supports participation and harmonized decision making at river basin management process. SRF has the key role for participation focusing on on implementation of concrete actions for river management and increasing mutual trust among stakeholders. In Soča decision making needs to assign importance to intact river ecosystems, enabling social and economic development by using ecosystem services concept.

SRF consulted citizens, investigated the subjects interested in, defined methods to be used and decided which actions to take (with questionnaire, infographic, events, etc.).

Activities in Soča Pilot Case Study (including stakeholders participation contributing to to the process of law change) were prioritized and SRF role in “participatory process-solving” was strengthened.
The participatory process started with the first Pilot Group meeting in May 2016. The meeting discussion concerned:

- Problems, main areas of the basin that should be addressed;
- If Soča River Foundation is the appropriate choice for the Pilot Group (PG);
- Stakeholders to be involved to build a Representative Group (RG) and how to motivate them to participate.

Participation and implementation phases went hand in hand, so there wasn’t a previous preparation phase. After the selection of the PG and RG, the process moved to the implementation phase directly involving stakeholders in the process.

During the Soča Day event (on 29th November 2016 in Idrija), participants tested the adapted participatory method COOPLAN (identify objectives, select actions implemented to reach the objectives, organize the actions in space & time). Based on a shortlist of defined activities, the PG suggested three of them feasible to deal with in the timeframe of SPARE project:

- National law for navigation on inland waters
- Definition of the system for co-financing of individual sewage treatment plants
- Green infrastructure - planning of cycling routes within river corridors

Feedbacks about priorities to be chosen have been gathered with questionnaire sent to RG members: finally, participation to the process of inland navigation law change was considered the most important.

Next major step was testing of participatory modelling & simulation methods for rapid self-assessment of river protection & management processes.
The project manager holds a sound experience in previous cooperation and participation projects, working for Soča Valley Development Centre. The facilitator has a background in aquaculture and a strong network with local communities.

The participatory process was prepared by IzVRS, together with facilitator and process manager.

Participants as the Representative Group are linked to various river related activities:
- Water sports
- Public sector, municipalities, decision makers representatives
- Tourism
- Angling organisations
- NGO’s
- River associations
- Journalists

Both males and females were equally represented while elders and younger people were in smaller numbers.

As a member of EU, Slovenia prepares periodic River Basin Management Plans according to the Water Framework Directive. At the moment the implementation of “The RBMP for Danube RBD and North Adriatic RBD 2015–2021” (RBMP I) is in the process. In the frame of SPARE, SRF consulted citizens, investigated the subjects they are interested in, defined methods and actions to be implemented, and intends to support participation activities also after the project SPARE ends.
WHERE
WHEN

February 2016
SPARE PRESENTATION TO PM & FACILITATOR

09 / 05 / 2016
PG MEETING

29 / 11 / 2016
SOČA DAY RC MEETING

24 / 01 / 2017
SMAG

May 2018
VIDEO INTERVIEWS

August 2017
VOTING ACTIONS

27 / 09 / 2017
IKEW

July 2018
PG MEETING SELECTION OF 3 FEASIBLE ACTIONS TO BE DONE
Participation in the Slovenian Pilot Case Study has been framed on several meetings of Pilot and Representative groups and on the key role played by Soča River Foundation identifying different interests in the basin. After the selection of the PG and of RG, the process moved to the implementation phase: directly involving stakeholders in the process of choosing actions to be implemented. Some of the participatory tools proposed by SPARE resulted very innovative: however, participation in Soča PCS was in need to put into practice concrete actions even without a framed preparation phase.
HOW

Many different tools were used:

- Adapted SPARE CooPlan and SMAG participatory methods were experimented;
- Video interviews were filmed;
- Newsletters were regularly prepared to inform the general public;
- A voting system (based on an e-mail sent to stakeholders) was implemented to collect feedback and to select activities to be carried out in the frame of SPARE;
- An international workshop was organized;
- Different meetings were carried out;
- Infographics and photobooks were produced;
- A voting system (based on an e-mail sent to stakeholders) was implemented to collect feedback and to select activities to be carried out in the frame of SPARE;

Average cost for SPARE activities was around 50,000 €:

- About 25,000 € for staff time (plus 800 € for travels)
- About 10,500 € for external staff / consultants
- About 6,000 € for events organization
- About 3,700 € for administrative costs
- About 6,500 € for communication activities
- Around 25 hours spent for participants - processes.
The main asset was the knowledge of the situation in Soča PCS. Both process manager and facilitator are well informed and know the whole history of previous participation processes. So, it was easier to steer among different issues that came up during the project SPARE. Another asset is the organization of past Soča days events.

- Staff with specific background was a concrete resource holding the know-how about local issues.
- A well organized lead team able to motivate and invite people to cooperate although the interest was quite low.
- SPARE means allowed videos and visual deliverables preparation.
- SRF was the right Institution or the project thanks to the bottom-up approach.
- Local communities voice has been heard.
- Maneuvering between different wishes, opinions and decisions was the best/winning asset of the project.
During the process a lack of interest among some stakeholders was noticed.

- Is important to avoid being too general and elementary in our activities and methods.
- Using serious games to work together with participants was not always the appropriate approach.
- Staff members are enough experimented and skilled to manage future activities in the Soča PCS. But a constant education and improving is necessary.
- Needed knowledge is defined according to the identified problems or needs along the way.
- SRF wasn’t an official SPARE partner so it hadn’t its own budget to be managed autonomously.
- Sometimes we risked losing the trust among different stakeholders.
Good opportunities are seen in the cross border cooperation and the partnership among different project members.

- SRF approached the Ministry of infrastructure to collect comments and suggestions to the new Inland navigation law. SRF prepared the comments in close cooperation with stakeholders and Representative group. The comments were sent to the Ministry of Infrastructure and the Foundation is waiting for a response.
- Positive trends affected also the visibility of SRF as one of the key players in the organisation of the yearly Soča day event.
- Promotion of SRF as a focal point for Soča river basin water related challenges has been successful thanks to SPARE.
- Usually when natural causes happen then also the discussions start. In the duration of SPARE project there were no floods or other extreme natural events.
- Activities of SPARE project have a (indirect) impact on local government decisions.
- Pilot group members are satisfied and stated that they want to meet regularly also after the end of SPARE.
- No particular negative changes in approaching river issues occurred during SPARE.
A lack of interest by some stakeholders may be a threat in the future.

- Lack of financial funding of SRF is an additional hurdle have a legitimate right and we took into account the time and resources needed.

- Government will be re-defined following elections results. More in general political instability normally slows down planning processes and increases temporary solutions adoption.

- There were some difficulties in involving younger population.

- It was also harder to involve top decision makers – different ministries.

- The implementation of foreseen activities takes some time. It is a slow process that doesn’t allow many faults. The trust of people is ranked as the highest priority.
The participatory activities should be tailored to local needs in order to ensure contribution from different stakeholders.

There are no fast decisions; it takes some time to involve all stakeholders to reach long-term solutions.

- Trust of local communities is very important.
- Transparency is essential.

- Design of the stakeholders engagement process should follow the steps: Information – Consultation – Participation – Negotiation – Empowerment. It is important to put the right people in the right position.

- Soča River Fundation (SRF) has been established to support better participation and harmonised decision making.

- SRF can become a link between stakeholders and decision makers to improve the flow of information and cooperation for mutual benefits.

- We have to focus first on smaller issues: SRF will try to create a discussion area to address issues and act as a catalyst in processes.

LESSONS LEARNED