Participatory environmental policy processes: experiences from North and South

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Introduction

Given the growing range of actors concerned with environmental issues, the increasingly contested nature of environmental problems and the importance of building trust around decision-making, a more participatory approach to environmental policy processes is often required.

But what sort of participation and for whom? Despite there being many claims made about the importance of participation in policy-making, there have been few attempts to assess actual experiences. In a recent paper (see details below), we set out to try and review the range of approaches for encouraging more inclusive forms of deliberation around environmental policy processes, drawing on experiences from both the 'North' and 'South'. The focus was on those approaches where space for citizen participation has been created 'from above', usually, but not exclusively, by government agencies.

A set of approaches, known collectively as Deliberative and Inclusionary Processes (DIPs), were explored in different settings through 35 case studies from both the North and South. A selection of these are shown in Table 1. Some of the key lessons are summarised below.

- While there has been an important emphasis on the development of participatory methods and tools in both northern and southern settings, there has been much less reflection on how these are located within broader policy processes and how those involved in participatory events are linked to wider policy networks and processes of policy change.

- Who is included and who is excluded in participatory activities often remains obscure. While different approaches to 'representation' are used in the cases examined, the question of whose voice is heard is less often discussed. Broader questions of who *convenes* the process and who *frames* the questions are therefore key.

- Processes of deliberation are inevitably bound up with power relations. Ideal forms of communication are rarely realised, especially if issues are contested and the stakes are high. Much of the discussion of participatory policy processes focuses on the achievement of consensus, while issues of how to deal with dissent, dispute and conflict are less fully examined.

The review highlights how DIPs are clearly not the 'magic bullet' to solve the dilemmas of public participation in policy making processes. They must be seen within the broader context of policy processes: where policy change emerges from a variety of sources; where non-linear, often incremental processes dominate; and, where power relations and political interests are key. Creating a space for more inclusive deliberation from above is potentially one route towards more informed and effective decision-making, reflective of diverse perceptions and rooted in trust based relationships.

The review also emphasises how DIPs may be appropriate in some settings but not in others. Seeking the appropriate combination of approaches and linking these to wider processes of policy change is therefore vital. In-depth deliberation is important where multiple framings of environmental issues exist. Teasing out and making explicit the core assumptions and underlying premises of particular position, whether emerging from scientific or lay understandings, is a central feature of deliberative processes. In environmental decision-making, values, ethics and moral questions are important, making moving from a technocratic approach to decision-making towards a more inclusive form essential. This is particularly relevant where trust is thin on the ground. Therefore DIPs may be a useful starting point for building the necessary trust in decision outcomes and addressing the scepticism of public perceptions around formal, expert-based institutions. Yet, this may not always be possible. Where the stakes are high, where positions have become entrenched and where interest group politics dominate, the opportunities for open forms of communication are often severely constrained.

Too often DIPs have been 'one-off' events, separated from the wider policy-making process. Therefore, it is important that such processes are embedded in effective institutional contexts. But this also suggests many challenges. Relations of power within policy-making bureaucracies may result in limited opportunities for other voices to be heard.

Table 1 Cases of DIPs in environmental policy-making[1]

Case Study	What objectives?	Who is included?	The procedure and methods used
Innovative Development for Air quality in Santiago, Chile	• To make a highly complex environmental problem manageable • To operationalise a plan that is legitimate and effective • To get the mutual commitment of the citizens and government • To produce a metropolitan plan and enable participative management/implementation of this plan	• Different participants at different stages but in total: Government officers, NGO members, consultants, university researchers and citizens. [About one half of the instrumentsincluded in the plan came from the citizens proposals]	• Action mapping and initial proposal • Participative formulation of plan towards participative management, including a follow up conference • Methods focused on representatives and citizens attending a variety of workshops with discussion in small groups
Land tenure policy change in Madagascar and Guinea	• Use of RRA to inform policy decisions at the national level regarding Land Tenure policy and national resource management legislation	• Direct participation of citizens in information production	• National Academics, development workers and Government staff involved in conducting case study RRAs, trained and facilitated by LTC Wisconsin University, in different regions and presenting findings to multiple government and NGO stakeholders at a number of regional workshops. In Guinea, those in the RRA teams were only Government staff – process had more policy impact.
Wetland management policy development in Pakistan and India	• To assess current impact of protected area policies on local communities • To revise management plans in the light of interaction between local people and outsiders • To initiate dialogue on policy reforms needed	• Direct participation of citizens in information production	• PRA training for, exercises conducted by, government and World Wide Fund for Nature staff. Appraisals completed in villages in National Parks in both India and Pakistan. Public deliberations on reforms in wetland management regimes
Malian gestion de terroir process	• Teams of facilitators bring different stakeholders together to reflect on local land use (within the 'terroir') and to develop plans for improvement • Series of negotiated land use plans, communities trained in natural resource management, maybe agreed investment in natural resources.	• Pastoralists, farmers, GT team members, (local government to limited extent)	• PRA etc. But the major criticism is that the frame for deliberation is set beforehand – critical in that the bounded space of the 'terroir' may be biased against pastoralists, and may in fact not be the most relevant unit for anyone in livelihood terms. The objectives are also criticised as fairly predetermined and bureaucracy biased: maps of the terroir delineating what resources are to be used for what.
Zimbabwean Environmental Management Bill	• Aim to unify and modernise array of colonial and post-colonial NR legislation-overlapping, contradictory, located in different ministries. To be done through participatory workshops, hearings etc. • Single coherent piece of legislation setting out rights and responsibilities of different stakeholders	• NGOs; environmental lawyers; unclear to what extent communities	• Those involved criticised organisation of the consultative procedures: notification of meetings, time to prepare formal responses.
Citizens Panel in Switzerland	• Locating a waste disposal site in the Canton Aargau	• Representative sample of people from potential site communities	• Citizens of twelve communities which offered potentially suitable locations for the waste disposal site were asked to take part in a citizen panel and met regularly over six months. Citizen's panel involves: Random sample of population, four committees established, introduction of issues, conflicting interpretations and different options, group and plenary discussions, evaluation of options, recommendations produced, discussion of recommendations by committee representatives in a 'supra-committee', final recommendations to media and public officials

1 Further case studies and more detailed information can be found in the full review. See Notes section at the end of the article.

Long established traditions of non-participatory styles of decision-making are not going to be changed overnight. Opening up spaces for participation may be the current vogue and may indeed respond to certain political and bureaucratic imperatives of the moment, but this will have limited impact without the emergence of more reflexive institutional forms which are genuinely responsive to new ways of thinking and acting.

As our review shows, political and organisational contexts make a big difference to the potentials of a more participatory policy making process. Where open debate, the acceptance of conflict and dissent and the encouragement of consensus and compromise are encouraged as part of a wider political and organisational culture, opportunities for effective participation are more likely. But equally these conditions are the exception, with the most common situation being that DIPs are used in an instrumental manner to further the existing remits of organising agencies.

The review emphasises how different phases of a policy making process require different approaches. Early on (particularly where the issue at hand is new or highly controversial), there is a need to open out the debate and encourage multiple perspectives (technical, moral, ethical etc.) to be aired. Many DIP methods aim for consensus-based decision-making. While this may be desirable, it may not be possible given the range of diverse perspectives and interests associated with environmental decisions. Where controversy is running high, conflicts must not be ignored in the vain hope that deliberative consensus will somehow emerge, but need to be addressed head on. Conflict negotiation and consensus building therefore need to be seen as two sides of the same coin.

While the review of the case studies offers a rather equivocal message about the prospects for participation in policy making, both North and South, this does not mean that there are no potentially longer-term benefits. Currently DIPs are seen to be often simply responses to perceived implementation and legitimisation problems by organising agencies, with little evidence shown of any intention (or indeed opportunity) to change in the short term. In the longer term, however, subtle shifts in the framing of debates may emerge, new actor networks and coalitions may be built and the capacities of participants may be strengthened through engagement with such processes. But such optimism must be qualified. In many settings – for example where aid flows dominate policy making, where 'civil society' is weak, or where a technocratic scientific establishment holds sway, a suitable caution must be added.

But contexts do change. The rapid pace of technological change shows no sign of abating: this will result in new forms of environmental risk, with uncertainty continuing to be a central feature of environmental decision-making. Across the world there is a growing concern about the links between environmental and livelihood/lifestyle issues among a wide range of actors, with new coalitions of interests forming that break down conventional barriers and categorisations. With this comes new ways of identification with issues and so, new understandings of citizenship, where concerns about livelihoods, environmental change and technological risk are central. In turn, with this comes a healthy scepticism about conventional forms of expertise and a demand for access to decision-making and policy-making institutions. In such changing contexts, then, participation in environmental policy process will become a basic requirement, not an add-on extra. It is our prediction, therefore, that the early experiments with DIPs over the last decade or so as discussed in the review will therefore likely expand, deepen and intensify. We hope that the lessons emerging from the review will assist in continued honest and reflective assessment of this important emerging experience.

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The full version of this paper is available from IDS (IDS Working Paper 113: 'Participatory environmental policy processes: experiences from North and South', 1999). It is also available on the web site http://www.ids.ac.uk (see Environment Group pages).