Practical Approaches to Participation

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Front cover: Participation in environmental management and decision-making can take many forms. Photo collage: Pat Carnegie. Photos: Macaulay Institute.

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Executive Summary

Purpose of Policy Brief

This policy brief stems from the 'Practical Approaches to Participation' workshop, held in October 2003 at the Macaulay Institute, Aberdeen. The aim of the workshop was to facilitate a critical dialogue on participatory approaches to environmental decision-making by bringing together practitioners, policy-makers, researchers and people who have taken part in participatory processes.

Despite the increasing demand for participatory processes, experience illustrates that following best practice guidance, without addressing wider issues of organisational and political context, will not guarantee satisfactory outcomes. This policy brief challenges the 'toolkit' approach to participation and focuses on the constraints to applying existing best practice approaches.

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Key Messages

Drivers

The demand for participation reflects broader social trends, particularly the quest for sustainable development, the support for partnership working and the challenge to traditional democracy, resulting in the desire for a greater civic voice. Drivers are both 'top down', coming from global and national legislation, and 'bottom up', coming from citizen groups. See section **2**.

Level of participation

Involving people varies from informing them of a decision, through to giving citizens full control. The difference between these levels is the relative balance of power and control between the participants and the instigators. See sections **3** and **4**.

Methods for participatory processes

Recognising the most appropriate level of public involvement has implications for the selection of the most suitable methods and tools. See sections **4**, **5** and **6**.

Benefits of participation

Participatory processes can help with **defining the problem** and **identifying the solution** from a wide variety of viewpoints, increasing our understanding of the interlinked nature of problems facing society. Participatory processes can **improve implementation**,

as a decision or a policy will be more effective if a broad coalition of stakeholders support the proposal and work together to deliver it. Participatory processes can **increase public trust**, as openness to conflicting claims and views increases the credibility of the final decision and encourages an active civil society. See sections **1, 3, 5** and **7**.

> **... openness to conflicting claims and views increases the credibility of the final decision and encourages an active civil society.**

Implications for participatory environmental management

Most environmental problems are complex, uncertain, extend over large spatial and temporal scales and may be irreversible. Therefore, environmental decision-making should be informed by a plurality of perspectives, be able to respond to changing circumstances and encourage civic responsibility and individual behavioural change. Participatory approaches assist with conflict resolution, which often underpins environmental management dilemmas, through seeking a shared definition of the problem and a collective solution. See section **4**.

Constraints to participation

Workshop delegates struggled to find unmitigated success stories to share and highlighted problems encountered when implementing participatory processes. These can be summarised as: increasing 'consultation fatigue' and public cynicism; working within boundaries set by 'non-negotiable' organisational or legislative structures; ensuring adequate and appropriate representation; building capacity of participants; managing expectations; attracting sufficient resources; obtaining a consensus or managing dissenting views; and choosing the appropriate scale for the process. See section **6**.

Conclusions

Potential ways forward are addressed in section **7** and concluding recommendations are made in section **8**. They can be summarised as the need to:

- Reflect on why people distrust participation and learn from the past
- Choose the appropriate level of public involvement
- Ensure all stakeholders have equal access and capacity to participate
- Bear in mind that local conditions are also affected by global issues
- Recognise multiple perspectives and the validity of different agendas
- Develop enabling agencies that support civic democracy
- Develop a professional network to build capacity within organisations and provide critical evaluation for participatory processes

1: Introduction

Calls for increased participation in decision-making have gathered momentum in the past few decades, spawning a wealth of theoretical and practical literature and influencing approaches to policy-making by various levels of government. This policy brief focuses on contemporary experience in Scotland, as driven by European and national legislation. Nevertheless, these issues have been discussed in other countries and are as old as society itself.

Participation seems intuitively simple, but remains poorly defined, meaning different things to different people. We define participation as "a process during which individuals, groups and organisations become actively involved in a project..." (Wilcox 2003, p. 50). By specifying that involvement must be active, this definition highlights how empowerment is fundamental to participation.

The workshop on which this brief is based was attended by practitioners and researchers whose interests were primarily in the role of participation in **environmental** decision-making. Environmental agencies, like many other government institutions, are increasingly expected to engage with multiple stakeholders and the wider public when taking decisions, and therefore have an interest in incorporating participatory approaches into their work. However, the perspectives on participation presented here owe much to experiences in other fields, particularly community development.

> **... empowerment is fundamental to participation.**

The content of this brief reflects the collective discussions of the workshop. It considers the tension between the increased pressure for institutions to be participatory and the difficulties of both engaging participants and then implementing participatory processes. Useful links and resources, which should be read in conjunction with this brief, are provided in section **10**. Rather than present a 'toolkit' or blueprint approach to participation, this brief identifies the range and type of problems faced when applying existing best practice approaches.

We begin by outlining the historical context and legislative background (section **2**) to participatory approaches to decision-making, then introduce contrasting perspectives (section **3**) and some models of, and approaches to, public involvement (section **4**). Sections **5** and **6** reflect some of the discussions at the workshop on the constraints preventing participatory approaches from working as practitioners and theorists had envisaged. Recommendations for potential solutions are summarised in section **7**. Section **8** draws together some concluding ideas, and finally we provide references to a selection of existing resources in sections **9** and **10**.

2: Context and Drivers

Direct public participation in the decision-making processes of governmental organisations, rather than representation solely through elected politicians, has become an increasingly influential ideal among western societies.

The emergence of this concept of a 'participatory democracy' is linked to broader social trends, such as the emphases on sustainable development (integrating social, economic and ecological dimensions of resource use to ensure quality of life for present and future generations), partnership working (linking market, state and citizens to deliver public goods) and the increasing public scepticism surrounding the 'objectivity' of the science used in environmental decision-making.

The impetus for a more participatory approach to governance stems from challenges to conventional forms of political representation and accountability. Participation has gone from being a radical concept to becoming widely accepted, with the use of non-participatory methods now being considered "illegal, ineffective and undemocratic" (Bulkeley and Mol 2003, p. 144). As such, participation in decision-making has come to be perceived as a democratic right. These new expectations demand new relationships between governments and citizens, requiring both vertical (between government and citizens) and horizontal (between different citizen groups) accountability (Goetz and Gaventa 2001).

> ### Box 1: Why Participation?
>
> - Ensuring that a wide variety of viewpoints are considered when defining the problem will assist decision-makers in understanding the interlinked nature of problems facing our society. This is best achieved by eliciting views from a spectrum of perspectives
>
> - Attempts to resolve problems by implementing a decision or a policy will be more effective if a broad coalition supports the proposal and works together to deliver it
>
> - A transparent process in which conflicting claims and views are considered can increase public trust in the final outcome. This not only enhances the effective implementation of the outcome but also has broader implications for building an active civil society

Top-down Drivers

The demand for more widespread use of participatory approaches is both 'bottom-up', coming from demands by citizens, and 'top-down', from legislative and political drivers in the global arena. The latter include the Brundtland Report, which linked its influential definition of sustainable development to public participation; principle 10 of the subsequent Rio Declaration, which emerged from the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development in 1992; and was repeated in the Johannesburg Declaration at the 2002 World Summit on Sustainable Development. European environmental programmes and legislation, beginning with the Fifth Environmental Action Programme, launched in 1993, have also incorporated the concept of participation. The Aarhus Convention (1998) makes public participation in environmental decision-making a statutory right. Within Scotland,

Box 2: Key Attributes of Many Environmental Problems

Complexity – ecological systems have complex, non-linear and dynamic interactions

Uncertainty – due to imperfect scientific knowledge and the indeterminacy of complex processes

Large-scale – many causes and effects of environmental change are global in scope and extend over generations

Irreversibility – many life-supporting functions cannot be restored if critical thresholds are breached

These factors mean that decision-making must:

- be flexible to react to changing circumstances and various forms of knowledge
- embrace a plurality of values and standpoints
- recognise individual responsibilities for environmental action

Source: van den Hove (2000)

government initiatives aiming to establish inclusive and participatory democratic processes include the Scottish Civic Forum, the Scottish Youth Parliament and programmes such as Active Communities and the Scottish Rural Partnership Fund.

Bottom-up Drivers

While legislation and policy drivers are one mechanism for encouraging governments and agencies to implement participatory approaches, another is direct pressure from interested parties. Such pressure may take the form of organised action, such as public protests, consumer boycotts of products, petitions, demonstrations and lobbying. Some community members may want to express their views on issues such as wind farm developments or the closure of local amenities, but feel unable to do so within the existing official frameworks. Applying 'bottom-up' pressure can help ensure that different voices within each community are heard in the decision-making process.

> **Often, solutions to cross-cutting and complex environmental problems cannot be solved through technology or scientific expertise alone, but require the active cooperation of different stakeholders.**

Participation in Environmental Decision-making

In the environmental arena, participatory approaches have evolved from the anti-modernisation critique of development in the 1960s and 1970s, where the content and process of technocratic decision-making were seen as exacerbating rather than solving environmental problems. As van den Hove (2000) argues, grounding decision-making in public deliberation is the best way to ensure holistic thinking about the environment, given the intertwined relationship between the biophysical world and human activities. Often, solutions to cross-cutting and complex environmental problems cannot be solved through technology or scientific expertise alone, but require the active cooperation of different stakeholders. From such a perspective, participation is central to environmental decision-making.

3: Contrasting Perspectives

A dilemma lies at the heart of participation. On the one hand, best practice guidance is in demand. On the other, existing recommendations appear insufficient to achieve satisfactory processes and outcomes.

Some practitioners, who have worked with participatory approaches for decades, note that there is widespread disillusionment amongst themselves, stakeholders and the wider public, despite the literature available regarding how, when and why to adopt participatory approaches. This means there is a need for a more selective approach to the use of participatory methods, reserving them for situations where participants can make a meaningful contribution and where resources are available to implement outcomes. Participatory approaches often require considerable time and energy and, for this reason, many people are unable or unwilling to take part, particularly when they doubt whether their input will be taken into account. Yet, these and other non-participants affected by the outcomes of a process still expect decisions to be taken equitably and transparently.

Simply following recommendations, without considering the wider institutional and political context, is insufficient to consistently achieve satisfactory processes and outcomes.

Other practitioners, particularly those who are new to participatory approaches, may seek best practice techniques and advice on how to use them successfully. Their enthusiasm stems from a sense of the many benefits that participatory approaches have to offer. These include those related to the success of specific projects or policies, such as allowing different concerns and interests to be taken into account at an early stage, learning from a wider range of ideas and perspectives, and achieving a broad sense of ownership of the outcomes. Wider benefits include contributing to an inclusive and pro-active society whereby involving all stakeholders in decisions affecting them would help promote active citizenship and thus would benefit society in general.

The challenge, therefore, is to address the demand for best practice guidance whilst illustrating how simply following recommendations, without considering the wider institutional and political context, is insufficient to consistently achieve satisfactory processes and outcomes.

4: Approaches to Participation

Many theorists have proposed schema illustrating the difference between consultation and participation. Whichever method is chosen, defining a shared problem and seeking a collective solution provides scope for creative thinking, and the identification of alternative solutions.

The best-known schema of this kind is Arnstein's ladder of participation (see Figure 1). This implies that the higher rungs of the ladder are more desirable than the lower. However, some practitioners instead use the image of a 'wheel of participation' to convey the alternative message that there are legitimate uses of these different forms of engagement. The practitioner's task is then to determine which is most appropriate for their own particular context.

Goetz and Gaventa (2001) focus on the different functions that these levels of engagement might serve. They distinguish between **consultation**, the flow of information between agencies and citizens; **presence**, enabling citizens to access the decision-making process; and **influence**, the ability of citizens to affect the outcomes of the process. In contrast, Michener (1998) divides the approaches according to the reasoning behind their adoption, contrasting 'planner-centred' and 'people-centred' approaches. **Planner-centred** approaches focus on outcomes. Here, participation is promoted on the basis that it makes it more likely that the project will achieve its aims. **People-centred** approaches are applied to build capacity and empower local people to define and meet their own needs.

The central aspect of these typologies is the relative balance of power and control between the participants and the instigators. In other words, who initiates the projects and who is able to define and influence the agendas?

> **The central aspect of these typologies is the relative balance of power and control between the participants and the instigators.**

Figure 1: Arnstein's Ladder of Participation

Level of engagement

Citizen power

Tokenism

Non-participation

CITIZEN CONTROL
DELEGATED POWER
PARTNERSHIP
PLACATION
CONSULTATION
INFORMING
THERAPY
MANIPULATION

Source: Arnstein (1969)

Box 3: Techniques for Public Involvement

Possible techniques for the spectrum of public involvement (from 'informing' to 'control') include:

using trained facilitators
brainstorming
focus groups
local opinion polls
in-depth citizen groups
visits
citizens' juries
one to one meetings
consensus conferences
questionnaires
planning for real
internet sites
community group meetings
summary document mail outs
local events
brochures
special theme days
leaflets
competitions
independent expert reviews
games
information offices
educational programmes
workshops
media campaigns
open parliamentary meetings
publicised case studies
public meetings
introductory talks
exhibitions at local events
slide shows
exhibitions in public places

Source: Based on Wilcox (2003)

Getting the Process Right

The outcomes of participatory approaches are extremely sensitive to the way the process is conducted. Each process generally uses a range of different individual methods, each with its own strengths and weaknesses. Good practice dictates that methods should be tailored to the specific context, especially the level of engagement required. Other significant factors include the aims and objectives of the process, the resources available, and the constraints on implementing possible outcomes. The stage of the process at which a method is used is also an important consideration. For example, encouraging engagement in the process is likely to require different methods compared to evaluating the outcome.

Different methods suit different personalities. This is another reason for preferring a combination of methods if a broad range of participants are to be involved. Past experience shows that any method can potentially exacerbate conflict if handled insensitively. The collapse of a process is often attributed to top-down implementation, e.g. not allowing enough time to build a consensus.

Another factor influencing the success of participatory processes is the role of the facilitator or project manager. Many projects attribute their successes to the skills of the person in this role, rather than to the particular methods used. Such skills may include technical expertise for methods such as multi-criteria approaches, scenario building and computer modelling. However, even seemingly simple methods, such as informal group discussion, require skilled facilitation to ensure the active involvement of all. A successful facilitator needs to be perceived as being open to multiple perspectives, approachable and flexible, while also being capable of maintaining positive group dynamics, tactfully handling participants inclined to dominate a discussion, and encouraging more reticent people to have their say. Such skills are difficult to teach and are based on practical experience, intuition and empathy.

Implications for Civic Society

Some practitioners believe that governments and their civil servants have a responsibility to engage with society and to help people develop their capacities as active citizens. Taking a broad perspective can help to narrow the gap between the professionals, with their technical expertise, and other stakeholders, with their own local or specialist knowledge. Framing policy issues in the broadest possible terms also maps out all the issues and obstacles, providing a more comprehensive definition of the problem.

Group exercises to design a participatory process

Participation should improve decision-making by encouraging participants to establish common ground, rather than taking adversarial approaches which create winners and losers. Allowing multiple stakeholders to define the problem may also help ensure a fairer outcome that takes account of different values and needs. Decisions that are based on mutual understanding and an agreed way forward are more likely to last than those based on a 'win-lose' trade-off. As one workshop delegate put it, participation in decision-making is a way to achieve 'compliance without coercion'.

Participation in the decision-making process can also aid with implementation. Evidence, much of it from the developing world, suggests that locally based, locally owned decisions are often the most effective in the long term. This is the principle behind the drive for subsidiarity in environmental decision-making. Furthermore, broad ownership of a decision makes it more likely that implementation will be supported by a range of stakeholders,

5: Engaging, Targeting and Responding

Increasing calls for participation have coincided with an increased incidence of consultation fatigue, whereby it is ever more difficult to persuade people to take part in new initiatives.

Consultation Fatigue

Many practitioners have noted that increasing numbers of the public are cynical about attempts to involve them in decision-making. Consultation fatigue arises as people are approached more and more often to participate, but perceive little return on the time and energy they give up to do so. Community groups, for example, receive ever-increasing numbers of requests to take part in consultations but can only do so in their own time and often at their own expense. Filtering large quantities of invitations to identify those of most relevance can in itself be time-consuming, particularly where the context of the involvement solicited is not made clear. Approaches to particular groups and individuals to take part in initiatives should therefore be targeted, acknowledging the resource commitment that active involvement entails for participants and sponsors alike, to help prospective participants to identify where their input is likely to be most meaningful.

> **It is ultimately counter-productive to use the rhetoric of participation if a decision has already been taken.**

Consultation fatigue may be due to the sheer number of requests many people get to become involved, the poor quality of processes in which they do become involved, or the apparent lack of impact on actual policy decisions. Many feel that the latter two are the more significant factors, as well-run and well-supported processes would not leave people feeling sceptical about the value of their involvement. Participatory approaches, therefore, should only be adopted if those commissioning them are willing and able to accept and act upon their outcomes, and are prepared to devote the necessary time and resources to supporting these processes. In some circumstances, using an approach further down Arnstein's ladder, such as simply informing people of a decision made without their involvement, may be more appropriate.

A common feature of consultation fatigue is that people suspect that a decision may already have been taken, despite the organisation claiming to offer participants the chance to influence that decision. Many justify such suspicions by citing previous examples where they believe this to have been the case. Participatory approaches, therefore, are least appropriate where participants have no opportunity to influence the final outcome. It is

ultimately counter-productive to use the rhetoric of participation if a decision has already been taken, and thus participatory processes should only be considered when there is a commitment to listening to, and acting on, the issues raised. All in all, there needs to be a clearly defined rationale for actively involving stakeholders in the process.

Consequently, not all processes are amenable to participation. Nor do stakeholders and the wider public demand, or expect, to take part in all decisions. Involving stakeholders in extensive deliberation is clearly not appropriate for secret or emergency decisions. It is unlikely to be suitable for routine decision-making, where potential participants do not find the issue at hand sufficiently engaging to warrant their input. Sometimes, stakeholders may have little energy for, or interest in, discussions of the issues at hand, perhaps for reasons unrelated to the process in question. Consequently, a variety of reasons may prevent people from engaging in a given participatory process.

> **Participatory processes should only be considered when there is a commitment to listening to, and acting on, the issues raised.**

Who to Involve?

It is generally acknowledged that for a process to be called participatory, all interested and affected parties should be represented. Participation will be impaired if there are imbalances or omissions in the representation of stakeholders. Particular difficulties are faced when working with 'hard to reach' populations (Pain and Francis 2003), for example elderly or young people, non-English speakers, and spatially or socially isolated groups such as the homeless. Silent voices, such as future generations and non-human species, are similarly troublesome.

Another issue is how to decide on the 'right' number of participants. While ideally all views should be represented, it is hard to balance being inclusive with maintaining an effective small group dynamic for face-to-face deliberation. Unlike snapshot measures of opinions such as polls, deliberative processes tend to be judged on the quality of debate and the breadth of views considered rather than statistically defined sample sizes.

As many writers have highlighted, issues of representation can be extremely complex. Particular questions include: How should we decide who represents the general public? Should a community, of interest or of place, be represented as one voice or many? Are participants invited or self-selected? Are they participating as individuals or as mandated representatives of specific groups? If they are accountable to a constituency, do they have the authority to make decisions on that group's behalf? Therefore relationships, and in particular, trust, are important not only **within** the participatory group process, but also **between** participants and the wider constituencies they represent.

Box 4: Delivery or more Distrust?

... existing **D**istrust

Involve stakeholders

build **C**redibility

increase **E**xpectations

Deliver

(or more **D**istrust) ...

One of the workshop speakers, Drew Mackie, used the mnemonic DICED to illustrate the risks associated with attempts to employ participatory approaches in unsuitable situations. As participatory approaches often arise due to discontent with established relationships between the government and citizens, most processes begin with citizens **D**istrusting existing institutional arrangements. However, with effort it is possible to get stakeholders **I**nvolved in a process, and this builds **C**redibility and trust between stakeholders, in turn leading to increased **E**xpectations. If the process leads to **D**elivery of the agreed objectives, a positive cycle of trust is developed. However, if it does not, the original **D**istrust then increases.

Building Capacity

The value of engaging with the public on environmental decision-making has been questioned on the basis that some people may not have the ability to meaningfully engage in what are often technical debates. However, many experienced practitioners are of the view that all stakeholders have the potential capacity to engage in decision-making, given adequate support. There is a difference between capacity and opportunity to participate, thus simply providing the opportunity is not enough (Weber and Christopherson 2002). Furthermore, people's ability to participate on an equal footing can be compromised by social inequalities such as differences in age, gender and educational background (Pellizzoni 2003).

Enabling all participants to provide a meaningful input to a process, therefore, requires considerable thought as to how to develop the capacity of particular individuals, or how to tailor the process to the different capacities of those identified as stakeholders. Many political theorists have argued that participatory approaches serve as an educative process, whereby participants can develop the confidence and knowledge to engage in the political life of their societies. From this point of view, providing support to those who need it realises benefits which reach considerably further than the single participatory process in question.

6: Challenges for Participation

Many practitioners feel that there is a continuing gap between the rhetoric and reality of participation. We therefore focus here on trying to understand the constraints preventing the theory from being translated into practice, rather than on producing guidelines echoing those which already exist.

Managing Expectations

A common criticism is that creating an open and flexible discussion leads to raised expectations and 'wish-listing' by participants. This puts the instigators in a difficult position, where they feel unable to deliver all that is asked of them, fuelling the negative cycle of distrust between government and citizens. Setting clear objectives at the start of the process in a participatory manner helps participants to understand the boundaries of the particular process. Previous research carried out among the community can provide an overview of problems, allowing the project manager to highlight how the particular issue in question fits within these wider expressed needs. In particular, being realistic in setting objectives, and not attempting too much too soon, is important.

Identifying Non-negotiable Positions

Where environmental problems or their consequences are complex, large scale and irreversible, it may not be possible to give free rein to participants to determine environmental decisions. Environmental policy-makers have statutory and, some argue, ethical duties to protect the environment, which may conflict with the priorities of other stakeholders. Whilst an inclusive process should aim to develop mutually acceptable solutions that minimise the need for trade-offs between environmental and other concerns, any limits to decision-making must be clearly spelt out at the start of the process. This may mean that participatory processes cannot be fully empowering, as agencies retain the right to veto outcomes if they conflict with their statutory duties.

> **Environmental management decisions are often constrained by the 'non-negotiables' of top-down legislation and policy.**

Environmental management decisions are often constrained by the 'non-negotiables' of top-down legislation and policy. These are often formed from prior political processes and it may not be appropriate for local communities to overturn nationally or internationally agreed principles. There is a tension between governance of the environment based on regulation by the Government, whose members are appointed through democratic votes, and public participation in how the environment is regulated on a day-to-day basis. However,

there may be room for bottom-up processes to seek collectively developed approaches when **implementing** top-down policy.

Constraints to Full 'Citizen Control'

The success of participatory approaches sometimes depends on people whose influence may be difficult for the initiator to detect. Internal organisational culture is a further constraint which may make it difficult for individuals to make the best decision on whether or not to run a participatory process – while the individual may be committed to delivering its outcomes, key senior-level decision-makers within the organisation may not be.

> **... despite best intentions, participatory approaches do not always empower but may unwittingly serve to legitimise and support the status quo.**

Writing on what they call the 'tyranny of participation', Cooke and Kothari (2001) argue that despite best intentions, so-called 'participatory' approaches do not always empower but may unwittingly serve to legitimise and support the *status quo*. Many people's experiences of participation have been coloured by a sense that the aim of the process was simply to validate decisions already made, or to provide a veneer of democratic legitimacy where the organisation commissioning the process did not want to take full responsibility for a decision. Examples of this kind are often cited by those experiencing consultation fatigue and play a significant part in the downward spiral of distrust. In many cases, therefore, the most significant decision may be whether to adopt a participatory approach in the first place.

Adequate Resources

Participatory processes can be time- and resource- hungry. Failures are frequently attributed to a lack of resources being devoted to engaging with stakeholders or implementing outcomes. It is often difficult to determine a budget fully in advance, as the iterative and potentially open-ended nature of a process requires sufficient time and support until a natural end-point is reached. However, the costs of running an adequately resourced participatory process should be weighed up against the likely costs of resistance to decisions taken and enforced without engaging stakeholders. This resistance can often add considerable time and expense to a project, or lead to its outright failure. Furthermore, there are many potential benefits of participatory approaches that are difficult to quantify in advance. For example, if stakeholders come to feel that they have ownership of a process, this can ensure sustained action beyond the employment period of the project officer.

Reaching Consensus?

While there are obvious benefits to reaching a consensus, there are also many risks in making this a specific aim of the process. Too much emphasis on consensus may prevent contentious but important issues from being aired, or gloss over them without engaging with the real sources of contention. It may also discourage people from making criticisms which might ultimately prove constructive; and some participants may become marginalised if they feel unable to express their genuine concerns.

Building consensus is not always possible, particularly where participants hold opposing values, or fail to respect alternative views. For example, there may be different views on what constitutes knowledge or evidence: not all stakeholders recognise subjective opinions as having the same value as technical data. In addition, stakeholders may prefer to further their own objectives rather than seeking collectively agreed outcomes. This is particularly likely if the process in question challenges the *status quo* and vested interests.

The diversity of positions, interests and values is often most visible at the local scale.

Selecting an Appropriate Scale

Tensions often exist between bottom-up and top-down approaches to policy making. The former builds on values and visions rooted in local histories and cultures, and therefore tends to produce context-specific results. The diversity of positions, interests and values is often most visible at the local scale. For these reasons, participation is often seen as something that is most valid for processes working at a defined local scale.

However, the global drivers stimulating demand for participatory approaches require processes which operate at regional, national and global levels. These levels are connected, for even at a local scale, participatory processes will be influenced by regional, national and global issues. Equally, generic issues such as power relations, access to resources and time constraints apply regardless of the scale of the process (DETR 2000).

Nevertheless, determining which spatial scale a participatory process should operate on, and in particular how local level processes can be integrated into processes operating at larger spatial scales, is a complex issue. Equally, ensuring the inclusion of all interested parties, and representing diversity, presents practical difficulties when trying to implement these philosophies on a large spatial scale.

7: Ways Forward

This section provides an overview of some constructive approaches to dealing with the constraints identified in previous sections. While there are no easy solutions, workshop delegates were able to identify the following potential ways forward.

Reforming Institutions and Promoting Change

Delegates felt that it was essential to work on the broader institutional context of participatory processes. Many of the current constraints were seen to be related to organisational culture, such as the difficulty of persuading decision-makers to commit in advance to implementing the outcomes of a participatory process and of obtaining adequate resources. In many cases, this requires a radical change in organisational cultures, asking government, agencies and other decision-making institutions to demonstrate a willingness and flexibility to respond to the outcomes of participatory processes. This suggests the need for reforming institutional structures: if participation is a democratic right, not just a normative goal, then participation must be institutionalised.

While this is clearly an ambitious goal, at least some felt that progress could be made if practitioners communicated the difficulties they currently experience, as well as the potential benefits of participation when successfully applied, to their colleagues. Nevertheless, it is understandably difficult to persuade decision-makers to devolve control to a process whose outcomes are unknown. This is all the more so given that these decision-makers, rather than the stakeholders involved in the participatory process, are ultimately held accountable for that decision. As such, advocates of participatory approaches need to communicate their concerns not only to those implementing the process, but also throughout their organisations and particularly to those implementing the outcomes.

If participation is a democratic right, ... then participation must be institutionalised.

Organisations should therefore create an enabling environment which is flexible enough to respond to the iterative nature of participatory processes. Participation requires an environment that promotes social learning, where organisations practise Chambers's mantra of 'start, stumble, self-correct and share' (2002, p. 4). Clear and self-critical reflection is part of the learning process for participatory approaches. However, delegates pointed out that their organisational structures, particularly the way professional status was judged on their perceived expertise, tended to discourage a learning approach to their work (see also Pain and Francis 2003).

Building Relationships

The implications of these changes are that agencies not only deliver environmental protection and enhancement, but also play a role as contributors to civil society, including the 'bigger picture' of community development, civic culture and enhanced democracy. This is why some of our workshop speakers referred to a 'systems analysis' framework that links participatory processes to philosophies of active citizenship. The emphasis on (re)building a virtuous cycle of trust between stakeholders implies that participation is about maintaining relationships between stakeholders as much as delivering instrumental outcomes.

Thus success stems from strong relationships between different stakeholders, including inter-agency partnerships. Part of this process includes acknowledging the positive and negative implications of previous history between stakeholders. While protecting the biophysical environment might be the objective, developing and maintaining stakeholder engagement in environmental protection is fundamental to achieving this. However, focusing on these relationships is often at odds with the narrow technical focus of many environmental agencies.

> **... participation is about maintaining relationships between stakeholders as much as delivering instrumental outcomes.**

The use of 'internal champions' or 'reform entrepreneurs' is a useful way of stimulating internal cultural change, but equally external pressure can help to promote change. Change also necessitates building human capacity through training staff and investment in processes for attitudinal change – including the provision of incentives for those engaging in participatory and empowering processes. As building trust and respect are complex, long-term and intertwined issues, they are difficult to evaluate using standard numerical indicators. These new approaches challenge the reliance on quantitative performance targets found in many organisations.

Effective Planning

Participatory processes work best when they are flexible, context-sensitive and iterative. However, they still require formal processes for ensuring that the philosophies and visions are carried forward in practice. Successful participatory processes need careful planning and project management which consider how to:

- publicise the process
- ensure that the necessary information is complete, understandable and accessible
- include time for reflection and review
- think through the resource implications
- handle inputs from other stakeholders
- establish mechanisms for feedback, evaluation and delivery

These issues are diagrammatically represented in Figure 2.

Figure 2: Designing a Participatory Process
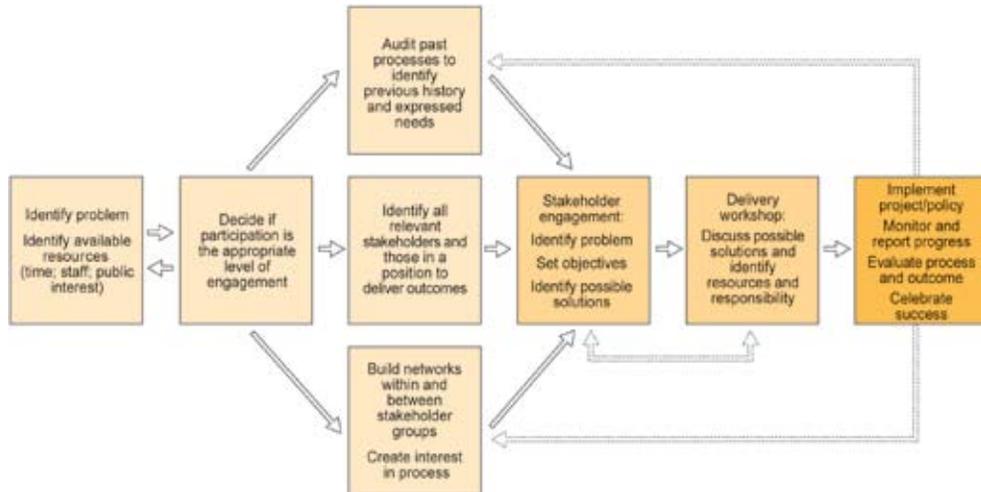
In this way participation is an example of needs-led planning, a cycle of investigation, agreeing a common vision, planning, resourcing the process and acting on the outcomes. The beginning of the process is particularly important, in terms of clarifying the drive for participation, defining stakeholders and building a mutually agreed vision of the process. However, implementation of the outcomes is vital in order to justify the time and energy expended during participatory processes. Evaluation considers the benefits of the process and improves project management, aiding effective implementation. This provides a further participatory opportunity when stakeholders are included in the process of monitoring and evaluation. Furthermore, celebrating successes demonstrates the benefits of participatory approaches and provides additional incentives to maintain relationships. Engaging the public will become less problematic when they see that participatory processes do deliver relevant outcomes.

The clear challenge to agencies is to stop 'doing' and start 'enabling' ...

Handing Over Responsibilities

To have effective participatory approaches, initiators need to ask: 'what or who is driving the process?' Some stakeholders find it difficult to get their agendas taken seriously, reminding us that participatory processes reflect political power structures. Interest groups struggle to obtain or maintain power, and participatory processes will not automatically transcend these struggles. Participatory approaches therefore need to be informed by an explicit understanding of hierarchical power relations within society, and actively involve and empower excluded groups who often have the least ability to articulate their interests. The clear challenge to agencies is to stop 'doing' and start 'enabling' stakeholders to make decisions in partnership with each other. This requires handing over some power and trusting in collective outcomes built on strong, long-lasting relationships.

8: Conclusions

Resolving the challenges identified in the workshop would enable agencies to become part of the solution, rather than contributing to the problem of increasing public disillusionment with participatory processes.

Participatory approaches can improve policy-making processes by providing a role for reasoned dialogue between interested parties. In turn, successful participation promotes active citizenship, greater social capital and increased trust in political decisions.

> **Successful participation promotes active citizenship, greater social capital and increased trust in political decisions.**

Philosophy is as Important as Techniques

There is no simple model for participation that can be applied in all circumstances. Instead participatory approaches require an explicit philosophy that emphasises empowerment, learning, listening and mutual respect. This philosophy influences the choice of techniques, as the design and application of processes must be appropriate to the context, the scale of the process and the level of engagement selected.

At the outset, initiators need to ask themselves why they are taking a participatory approach, for whom are they doing it and what purpose it is intended to serve. It must also be clear why stakeholders are to be involved, with all roles being clearly defined, debated and agreed. Effective participatory processes ensure that all stakeholders have the opportunity to participate, the capacity to participate, believe that their participation will be valued and that it will lead to a positive outcome. In short, applying the philosophy of participation is at least as important as selecting the 'correct' techniques.

> **Applying the philosophy of participation is at least as important as selecting the 'correct' techniques.**

Lessons from Best Practice

Effective participatory processes have clear, agreed objectives and start from a consensus on the problem. They are driven by a strong mandate from all stakeholders, who have a commitment to the process and to implementing the outcomes. The process needs enough time to develop mutual respect and trust, compatible ways of working, good communication and agreed processes for collaborative decision-making. It also requires good leadership and effective management.

Participation becomes much more difficult, and may fail, where:

- ▪ there is a history of conflict
- ▪ one stakeholder dominates
- ▪ the process lacks a clear purpose or goal
- ▪ the process has unrealistic goals
- ▪ there are unreconciled differences in philosophy and ways of working
- ▪ there is a lack of communication
- ▪ there is an imbalance of power and control
- ▪ stakeholders are missing from the discussion
- ▪ the process has any hidden agenda
- ▪ the perceived costs outweigh the perceived benefits

Above all, people determine the success of participatory processes. Participation requires teamwork, both within stakeholder organisations and between stakeholders. An effective process is relevant, addresses people's hopes and fears, respects diverse opinions, provides a sense of ownership, creates ongoing relationships, strengthens existing networks and facilitates joint planning. In other words, an effective participatory process makes a positive difference to participants, to the organisation initiating the process and, more broadly, to society as a whole.

Recommendations for a Participatory Approach

- ▪ Reflect on why people distrust participation and learn from the past
- ▪ Work on whichever rung of the ladder is appropriate
- ▪ Ensure all stakeholders have equal access and capacity to participate
- ▪ Bear in mind that local conditions are also affected by global issues
- ▪ Recognise multiple perspectives and the validity of different agendas:
  - ▪ give stakeholders time, particularly those who are not formally organised, to develop their collective perspective
- ▪ Develop enabling agencies that support civic democracy:
  - ▪ demonstrate commitment from the top of organisations
  - ▪ use internal champions
  - ▪ develop appropriate benchmarks
  - ▪ focus on relationships/networks to build capacity rather than on projects
- ▪ Develop a professional network to:
  - ▪ build 'soft skills' capacity within organisations and communities
  - ▪ provide critical evaluation for participatory processes

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