Involving people in policy development: A conference view

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Abstract

The paper reports on a workshop involving 120 people that addressed the effectiveness of public participation in policy development. The HAP method used in the workshop is briefly reviewed followed by a discussion of positive aspects of participation in policy development (as identified by conference participants). The most popular positive comments made by participants were that some participation does exist especially in a democratic society. In addition, participants identified the positive role of the media, the demand by the public to be involved and the evolving nature of participatory methods as important in how effectively the public are involved in policy development. Negative aspects identified included the lack of examples of 'full involvement', the abuse of participation, problems related to representation and lack of institutionalisation of participation. Potential solutions to the negative issues, identified by participants, are discussed and a transcription of the final action plan, focussing in institutionalisation of participation in future, is set out.

1. Introduction

It has been widely recognised within NGO, academic and policy circles that deliberation of science-based issues is no longer the exclusive realm of politicians and scientific experts but requires new participatory institutional structures for involving a wide range of actors and the public (e.g. Irwin and Wynn, 1996; Renn, 2001). The PATH project and conference aimed to contribute to the exchange of knowledge between practitioners, researchers and policy-makers in order to create more robust and multifaceted knowledge and synergy in developing effective participation.

One of the stated aims of the PATH project was to develop a network of policy-makers, stakeholders (e.g. from industry and NGOs), academics and members of civic society to exchange knowledge and experience of deliberation in science and technology policy development. Further, the project aimed to use this network to analyse the conditions under which existing methods are successful in facilitating dialogue between scientists, policy-makers and the public, and to develop innovative means to improve policy development. The project explored how participatory deliberative and inclusive methods in science-based policy could be advanced within the European Union to establish consultative institutions in policy-making processes. 120 members of this network met at the PATH conference in Edinburgh in June 2006. The experience and expertise of the network was directed towards these issues during the plenary workshop, were all conference participants used the H-form and action planning approach (HAP) to considered the question "How effectively are the public involved in policy development?" This paper sets out the results of those deliberations and the final action plan derived from the workshop.

2. Method

The HAP method comprises a H-form stage and an action planning stage. Guy and Inglis (2000, p87) found that the H-form method

> helps individuals and/or groups record their own views and ideas in a non-threatening and open yet structured way which fosters individual expression as well as common understanding and consensus…. The sequence and clear framework that the H-form provides keeps the discussion, focussed, specific and progressive.

A completed H-form from the PAYH plenary workshop is shown in Figure 1. The action planning follows neatly from the H-form and aims to progress discussion into a practical plan of action. The HAP method involved 6 steps:

1. Individually considering a question and providing a score;
2. Individually writing positive and negative reasons for that score;
3. A group discussion focussing on the positive and negative points offered;
4. Participants suggesting actions that could be taken to improve the score in future;
5. Ranking the suggested actions;
6. Planning for each suggested action by examining such questions as: Why the action is important. Who should be responsible to do what to make it happen? When it should be done, etc.

The HAP method is fully described in Kenyon and Hunsberger (2006, in this proceeding). The follow up to the HAP method involves writing up the outputs, disseminating them to participants and policy-makers, and following up on action points. This paper is part of the write-up and dissemination process. The raw material from the HAP process can be found at
http://www.macaulay.ac.uk/pathconference/index.html#output

Figure 1 - A completed H-diagram on participation in policy development

3. Results

Sixteen groups of PATH conference participants considered the issue of public involvement in policy development in the plenary workshop (4 to7 participants per group). Participants worked in groups of "practitioners", "academics", "policy makers" or "others". The first task for the individuals in the group was to score the question: "How effectively are the public involved in policy development?" where 0 was negative and 10 was positive. The range of scores provided by

participants was from 1-9 with a mean and median of 3. An ANOVA test was carried out to check for any significant difference between the means, and a Kruskal-Wallis for differences between medians, between the individuals characterised as academics, practitioners, policymakers and others. No statistically significant difference was found.

4. Positive reasons

The next task, also completed individually, was to write positive reasons for the score, i.e. why a zero score was not given. One of the most popular responses was based on **evidence that public participation does takes place**, is increasing in a variety of formal and informal formats, and does in some instances have an impact on policy. For example, one participant commented that "success can be observed". This includes a large number of comments relating to the fact that voting in national and European election is a form of participation and since democratic society exist in Europe and further a field, there is at least some hope for public involvement in policy development: "we could also say representative democracy is a way of participation." Some participants noted that relevant actors are at least paying lip service to public involvement and that even this can be seen as positive. For example, "because the politicians are at least paying lip service". Related to this, some participants pointed out that legislation at national and international level is requiring that participation does take place. For example: "EU policy text reflects quite a progressive stance on participation".

A number of themes of positive responses can be grouped under a "**substantive**" heading and relate to involving the public in policy decisions to improve understanding. Participants in the PATH workshop confirmed that participatory processes in policy development are allowing the public to "give new ideas", "contribute to knowledge production" and "enrich representation". Participants stated that there is evidence that lay people can discuss difficult issues, that citizens can deliberate and that some of the outputs from these processes are very positive. One response stated that "policymakers *have* started to think about the benefits of participation in policy development." Another noted that "different knowledge can be seen as 'equal' by at least some decision makers'.

Some positive comments can be categorised as **"normative"** and relate to broader implications for building an active civil society. For example, one participant noted that "public involvement can have positive effects in other areas (health, self esteem…)" and that "public involvement is useful in its own right". There were also a group of responses that can be categorised as normative referring to NGOs and other civic groups' involvement in policy development, representing the public and having positive impacts of policy making.

Another group of positive comments relate to increasing **demand by the public to become involved** in policy development and participatory processes and that they often have positive experiences. One typical response in this theme was that "people are starting to demand the right to be involved". Another participant commented that "there is a growing demand from a number of publics to be consulted".

A further theme relates to researchers and practitioners approach to participation. Conference participants were positive about how effectively the public are involved in policy development because of the **development, innovation and improving nature of participatory processes**. An increasingly wide variety of methods are available and being implemented, and allow for increased efficacy in involving the public in policy development. One participant wrote "there are likely

to be future improvements in methods" and therefore participation in policy development is positive.

A number of responses mentioned the **role of a free media** in acting as a positive route to public participation in policy development. As one participant put it "Public's view [are] sometimes accurately voiced by media (admittedly often exaggerated) but media plays a role in debating issues".

In summary, most conference participants were positive at least to come extent about public involvement in policy development because they have seen examples of public participation working. They considered substantive and normative reasons for public participation to be valid and positive. In addition, participants identified the positive role of the media, the demand by the public to be involved and the evolving nature of participatory methods as important in how effectively the public are involved in policy development.

5. Negative reasons

Following the positive reasons, participants were asked to give negative reasons for the score they offered. That is, why did they not give the question " How effectively are the public involved in policy development?" a score of 10. Many of the responses can be themes under similar headings to the positive reasons, but have a different slant.

So although participants commented in their positive reasons that examples of participation does exist, in their negative responses many people felt there were "Few examples in some countries" of involvement and "**no examples of full involvement**". Similarly, while participants expressed that voting was at least some form of participation, in the negative comments participants noted the deficiencies of representative democracy, such as that "the electoral system does not encourage public values to be expressed." And that "elections are a poor means of influence".

In the positive comments it was noted that there is at least "lip service" to public involvement. In the negative comments, it was stated that much public participation was only lip service and there was "abuse of participation" and similarly comments such as that the "usual stakeholders do not take PP seriously".

Substantive positive reasons were set out above, but participants also made **substantive negative comments** about public involvement in policy development. For example that the public was not involved to increase understanding or that "no-one with power is interested in incorporating public knowledge and views".

Whilst there were not "instrumental" positive reasons presented by participants, there were a number of negative reasons that might be grouped under this heading. **Instrumental** reasons relate to role participatory processes have in improving the acceptability of policy. However, many workshop participants commented on the perception that "policy is made prior to public participation" and that participation is used as a "legitimisation exercise" and public involvement "a political tool". One comments was that "involvement of the public so easily becomes a tick box exercise". Whilst these comments concern participatory processes that do take place, a similar stream of comments concern the lack of political will to involve the public in policy development at all.

Whilst an emerging theme under the positive reasons was that the public are demanding to be involved, conflicting comments were made under negative reasons. Participants highlighted the low turnout at elections all over Europe and that many people don't want to be involved in such processes. On a related point, a number of comments concerned representation in participatory processes and the perception that **representation is poor** and that people, especially certain groups such as children, are ignored. One comment stated that "participatory processes have not accounted for different cultural backgrounds". So considerable concern was expressed that participatory processes were not getting representation "right".

Other groups of comments do not relate to positive comments. Many comments were about the results of participation exercises being ignored. Numerous comments reflected the perception that **public involvement made no difference** in policy development, even if it was carried out at the right time, with the right commitment and so on. These comments are summed up by the statement that "final decisions have not taken into account the public's views". Other reasons stated that "results [are] ignored" and "recommendations [are] not implemented". Many workshop participants commented that people who did take part in participatory processes felt they would be ignored in public involvement exercises.

The **lack of institutionalisation of participation** and public involvement was the theme of many negative comments. Some participants were concerned that participatory processes were ad hoc and often held too late in the policy development process, with consultation and not participation taking place. Lack of institutional structures appear problematic at a number of stages. First, participants observed a lack of institutional structures to ensure participation takes place at all. A number of comments pointed out that consultation is not the same as participation. Second, people highlighted a lack of institutional participatory structures which allowed the public to become involved, even if participation was key in the policy development process. Third, comments related to a lack of institutional structures to enable outcomes of participatory process to be built into policy development. One comment was that there were "no clear government or institutional mechanisms to take outcomes on board, eg GM nation."

Power relations concerned a number of participants in a variety of ways. Some participants discussed the power of vested interests over the public in developing policy: "because vested interests still influence the policymaking process and that is reflected in the results". Others were concerned about the attitude of policymakers to participation and the public. For example, "policy makers and politicians fear loosing control". Also evident was concern about the power and prioritisation of different issues. A number of comments were about the dominance of economic interests over and to the exclusion of public values, opinions and views.

A final theme of negative comments surrounding public involvement in policy development are more practical**, relating to resources**, highlighting the time and money that participatory process require. Many comments were about the lack of resources directed to public participation. One participant stated that "administrations have to deal with many co-ordinated tasks" and participation is low on their priority list. Others felt the timetable of policy making and development were often ill-fitted to the time scales required for full and fruitful public involvement.

In summary, the main negative themes participants highlighted in response to the question on public participation in policy development were the lack of examples of full involvement, that lip service to participation was common. Substantive comments related to the perception that policymakers did not want to hear the views of others. Instrumental reasons that participation was abused and used as a political tool. That representation is often poor in participatory processes, and that public involvement makes no difference. Participants felt that public participation has not been institutionalised at any point and that power relations do not provide incentives for participation in a resource scarce environment.

6. Suggested actions

After a group discussion of positive and negative points, the next task in the HAP process was for individuals to suggest an action that could be taken to improve the score in future. In this section of the paper all the suggested actions are summarised and discussed. In the section below further detail is given on the actions which went forward to full action planning. As with the positive and negative points, the actions can be grouped into a number of themes. Inevitably, many of these reflect the negative points discussed above.

The two most popular themes of suggested actions were those relating to **institutionalisation of public participation in the decision making process**, and in a similar vein, encouraging a more participatory society through education, social and cultural efforts. First, institutionalising participation in the decision making process and within decision-making bodies was the thrust of many of the actions suggested by participants when asked how to increase the effectiveness of public participation in policy development in future. Suggestions ranging from general calls for a better process for public participations e.g. "Need clear mechanisms for incorporating public, experts and policy makers" to very specific suggestions about what should happen e.g. "Legislate a quasi-governmental structure that sponsors a bi-annual national deliberation on the most important public policy issue and the outcomes go directly to a floor vote of the house and senate bypassing the committee structure".

Second, **institutionalising participation within society** was thought important by very many participants. The suggestions under this heading were to include learning about participation in school level education, and educating the wider public about participation. In terms of social norms some participants emphasised the need to give people space to participate. For example, one suggestion was to "evolve a downward culture of 'pillying' people who work long hours" another suggested "less workload so people can be more active citizens".

Another large group of suggestions can be grouped under the theme of **responding to participatory outputs and increased transparency**. In the negative reasons above, many participants noted the perception that the results of participatory processes had little impact. Many suggestions appear to address this and ask for improved "rules for politicians obliging them to care more about public will". A set of related suggestions called for increased transparency in decision making with some calling for more transparency generally, and others providing more detail, for example that: "Policy makers should have to describe in detail the factors that led to the decision being made (transparency/ accountability)".

A suite of suggestions were concerned with participatory methods themselves. First, with **being clearer about participation**. Suggestions included being clearer about the definition of participation and the characteristic of good

practice. There were also calls for clarity on where participation fits into the overall governance structure, and clarity on what the objectives of participation are.

Second, suggestions were concerned with **developing better, more innovative methods**, possibly involving new technology. For example, "Get experience with Internet and new information society tools - cyber participation" and "Work on innovative approaches to engagement". The third set of suggestions relates to **better representation** and getting many different actors involved in participatory processes, including policy-makers, industry and "the under-represented".

Fourth, a number of suggestions concerned **better learning from previous participation**. This type of suggestion is effectively summed up by one comment "Proactive education in learning from past experiences and outcomes in order to implement a more effective future approach!".

Quite a number of suggestions related to **practical matters** of funding and developing participatory skills not only for researchers and practitioners, but also for policy-makers so they understand the need and the requirements for effective participation. Also in terms of practical suggestions, some were concerned with better communication of the benefits. Including the suggestion to get an "influential and popular celebrity to campaign and moderate these processes".

Finally, a number of interesting suggestions are not easily categorised. These include the following: Better media coverage that doesn't trivialize issues; Need significant recruitment of heterodox economists into all treasuries; and fundamentally alter the power structure of society.

7. Full action plan for involving the public in policy development

As described in Kenyon and Hunsberger (2006, this proceeding) all suggested actions were prioritised through voting and those with the highest number of votes taken forward to full action planning. In the action planning stage of the workshop, groups of conference participants were asked to consider the different actions and suggest who might be responsible for what to make it happen. How they might encourage it to happen, and when we would know if had happened. Table 1 is a direct transcription of the action planning carried out the PATH conference delegates in the workshop, and shows that although only eight suggested actions went forward to full action planning, those eight represent the full range of suggestions discussed in the previous section very well. Figure 2 shows the action plan as displayed at the end of the workshop during the PATH conference.

In different ways all of these actions relate to institutionalising or creating more formal structures for participation within decision making organisations specifically as well as society more widely. Action 1 concerns institutionalising participation within society and includes education about participation in the formal education process and society more generally. Actions 2, 3 and 4 address practical difficulties of public involvement in policy development with the aim of making involvement easier and thereby broadening representation of the public in participatory processes. The plans for each of these actions involve some form of institutionalisation. Action 2 talks about providing logistical support for participation as well as including participation within education. Action 3 is about creating the skills required within policymaking structures to understand the requirements of public participation. Action 4 is concerned with incentives for participation in terms of funding, understanding the benefits of participation as

well as education, and suggests education in schools and participatory strategies within government ministries.

Actions 5, 6 and 7 concern the institutionalisation of participation, with Action 5 suggesting the establishment of independent institutions to facilitate participation. Action 6 is about converting actors within decision making organisations and the setting up of structures to promote and implement effective participation, and ction 7 about the timing of participation within the policy development process. Action 8 relates to responding to participatory outputs and increased transparency in policy making.

Figure 2 - Action plan for involving the public in policy development

Table 1 – Action plan for the future effective involvement of the public in policy development

Action 1	Educate and encourage citizens to be reflective about their responsibility for shaping their environment (including social)
Why ?	So people will be motivated and be prepared to participate
Who?	- Schools - Process organisers
How?	Schools teach about self-governance and provide practice (group work) Schools provide substantive education of issues that arise on PP processes Schools offer classes in civics and give credit for students participating in such activities outside school Organisers of processes publicise the value of citizens opinions and show that citizen recommendations have impact on outcomes.
When?	Now
Done?	Increase response rate when citizens are asked to participate Increase initiation of PP by citizens
Action 2	Reduce logistical impediments to citizen participation
Why ?	To broaden the range of participants
Who?	Convenor (or foundation) to fund logistical support to participants/citizens/NGOs/users of PP processes - pressure governments to imitate Germany's policy on release time for political education/engagement

How?	- lobby employers/universities to recognise merit of PP service - provide financial/in-kind compensation for lost work/ home time - recognise PP as "political education" (release time from work) - provide child care - recognition of PP as career/education
When?	Now
Done?	Survey potential participants for why they did not choose to participate. They do not (or a reduced percentage) cite logistical or financial reasons
Action 3	Develop skills and understanding to write specifications, evaluate tenders, allocate realistic budgets, timeframes, staff support and money in public authorities and big corporations
Why ?	Because most contemporary processes are top down – practitioners cannot run effective processes and the organisations do not understand what is "good practice".
Who?	Public authorities in the first instance, must have willingness to supply resources. There is an important role here for civil society, NGOs "policy entrepreneurs" - so that it should not be such a top-down process. But where does government/corporation "willingness" come from? Educational role, focus on teachers and researchers educating the individuals in government and providing ongoing training in government/corporate organisations. Role for public controversy to apply the pressure that creates the willingness. However, we do not think that "good/best practice" is an appropriate approach/standard as it technicises what is fundamentally a political act, turning into a neutral tool.
How?	See previous
When?	On-going process
Done?	Never ending story but there may be some indicator that informs progress, such as changes in organisational decision and information flows, budget allocations, curricular changes, views on NGOs and other civil society actors that things have changed.
Action 4	Increase public participation incentives (eg. Fund pp adequately; provide other resources; buttress this by education; the fruits of PP will be used by policy makes)
Why ?	To build a culture of participation; to reduce a number of constraints; to make politicians take part more seriously.
Who?	- Generic: education institutions; ministry of industry - Topic specific: research centres; branches of government
How?	Schools: science education. Ministries: strategies and project planning. Research centres: strategies and project planning. Local governments: project appraisal
When?	Strategic: Upstream projects. General public: concept and design. Project-specific groups: beginning – middle – end (evaluation).
Done?	- feedback by politicians - project evaluation
Action 5	Set up independent institutions (organisations)
Why ?	- Get away from one-off efforts - continuous link to policy - independence is important so that people participate BUT needs to be respected by existing political structure
Who?	Depends on the political/cultural context of the country. Academics need to advocate this as a solution
How?	Advocate/advertise organisations to make it visible and accessible. Model on Danish Board of Technology – call it something different though – make it suit the mission. Sell it to politicians in that it may legitimise their decisions (the bait!). Make it easy access for individuals. More resources need to be committed. Encourage process to rebuild the rights and duties pf a citizen – collective process – encourage people to take part.
When?	ASAP. There is a variation across countries about how quickly this can be

	implemented
Done?	When there is an Institute for Public Participation. When everyone feels they are a citizens and can carry out their rights and duties – again related to the political process/context.
Action 6	Convert policymakers – Don't be afraid! Find mechanisms to take into account the fears of the powerful to open up to deliberation and participation
Why ?	Change through obligation is working neither effectively nor efficiently. If co-operation with willing powerful makes fun then life will be more wonderful, but for this their fears must be taken into account. Treat the most important barrier to participation. The have power, implement policies and also gatekeepers to process and whether participation takes place.
Who?	Everyone? Policymakers (their bosses); citizens who vote; practitioners and academics.
How?	Academics and practitioners: manage expectations; demonstrate benefits through past case studies. Citizens: write/phone/ lobby! Policymakers: learn and enjoy. Bosses – reward!
When?	Now!
Done?	Increase in truly collaborative and participatory projects funded. PPP become essential for projects (when appropriate) not a "luxury".
Action 7	Plan timing of PP with decision making timetable More early public involvement
Why ?	Improve timing of feedback mechanisms (from public consultation) and integrate timing into decision making timetable. More possibility of public framing questions. Supports seriousness of process. More likely to lead to broader acceptance of process/outcomes. Public response must be collected at a time when it can be taken into consideration in final decision making process. Some decisions (eg road pricing) will only be implemented at early stage in political party's ruling period.
Who?	Need 'liaison point' for decision-makers and citizens which would get current issues in policy process noted and where citizens could access information and details; part of this would be a forum to decide what needs wider engagement and mobilise process. Citizens need to act and decision-makers willing to be open about what is going on.
How?	Something similar to the Danish Board of Technology with links to parliament and government but where citizens can have direct access. Important to have regional and local sub-offices. Lobby national government for this/petitions. Try to get seed funding for test case and how it would work.
When?	The sooner the better. Now.
Done?	When such "info-hub" and sub-centres are in place and used. Ie. PP launched earlier and feed into decision making process.
Action 8	Improve the transparency of how results of PP link to policy or decisions
Why ?	- Creates iterative improvement in the link between participation and policy-making - Helps reveal the values and rationale behind decisions
Who?	- Decision-makers need to give arguments for using, or not using, the inputs of participation - Practitioners need to make clear their methods (and advantages and disadvantages) - Participants reflect on feedback and improve input
How?	All groups should provide feedback - articulate explicit links between decisions and input - use a variety of reporting mechanisms and disseminate findings - be honest about motivations
When?	Before, during and after participatory processes
Done?	Written evidence or other feedback appears showing how inputs were used

7. Conclusions

The scores given by the participants to the question "How effectively are the public involved in policy development?" provide, on average, a rather gloomy picture. However, using the HAP method offered a progressive way of developing the question and the responses from participants gives a rich and diverse picture of the current state of public involvement in policy development. It is clear that there are grounds for optimism, especially because there are good examples of public involvement in policy development, because it is increasingly seen as important to involve the public and because theory and practice of participation is progressing.

However, there is clearly work to be done. The findings of the workshop indicate that this work lies primarily in institutionalising public involvement in a variety of ways. The action plan set out in this paper takes tentative steps in indicating how this institutionalisation might be implemented and proposes tasks for researchers, policymakers practitioners and the public alike. It is a process that can be tracked, since the plan looks at when we will know the action has been implemented. If the relevant actors can be encouraged to take some of the steps suggested in the action plan, it will be interesting to return to the plan in 5 years time to evaluate it's impact and see just how effectively the public are then involved in policy development at that point in time.

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