

The H-form and action planning (HAP) method for focussing and progressing group deliberation

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Abstract

The paper introduces the H-form and action planning (HAP) method used in the PATH participatory workshop. The aim of the workshop was to benefit from the participatory experience and expertise of the 120 conference delegates in considering three issues: participation in policy making, scale issues related to participatory processes, and representation in participatory processes. The paper sets out the elements of the method and discusses how each was implemented in the PATH workshop. There is a discussion on aspects of the method that worked well and that did not work so well. The paper concludes with a discussion of the benefits of using the method in a conference setting.

1. Introduction

The aim of the PATH workshop was to develop and facilitate a process which made use of the participatory experience and expertise of the 120 conference delegates. The method used was adapted from the H-form developed by Guy and Inglis (1999), and extended to include an action planning element. Guy and Inglis (1999, p 87) found the H-form "tool 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." An action planning element was integrated into the process to produce action-oriented outputs that could take ideas forward to policy makers. The outputs from the workshop can be found in Kenyon and Hunsberger (2006) in this proceeding.

This paper details the method used, reflects on advantages and disadvantages, and concludes on the contribution the HAP (H form and action planning) method made to the PATH conference. Whilst the paper refers to the themes and questions discussed and developed at the PATH conference, the method is generic and can be used and adapted to any number of different situations and themes.

2. The HAP method

The HAP method involves: considering an overall question; individually generating positive and negative aspects of the situation defined by the question; discussing these as a group; coming up with suggested ways of improving the situation; and 'voting' on these to assign group priority; and then taking these forward to action planning. The method was implemented in two parts in the PATH conference. In part one, the H-form was used to reflect on the current state of affairs [practice] and to develop suggestions related to three particular questions/issues derived from the conference themes. The three questions were:

1. How effectively are the public involved in policy development?

2. How good are participatory methods at involving people at multiple scales?
3. How well are different values represented in participatory processes?

In part two, the suggestions were further developed into an action plan for each question.

3. Part 1: The H-form Introduction

Around 120 participants were seated around tables and asked to work in groups of 5 or 6. Participants were seated according to which of the following groups they felt best reflected their role: academic, practitioner, policy maker, or "other". Each group was given a large piece of paper with a blank H-form with the same question (Figure 1); various coloured pens; a commentary card; and a stack of sticky notes.

Figure 1 - The blank H-form

How effectively are the public involved in policy development?												
Negative Reasons											Positive Reasons	
	☹									☺		
	Not at all well					Very well						
	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	

A pilot workshop held before the conference showed that the introduction to the session was very important. Participants needed to know why the workshop was happening, what they would do and what would happen to the outputs. In terms of why the workshop was included in the conference programme, participants were informed that conference organisers wanted to:

- "practice what we preach!" in a conference about participation;
- make the most of 120 people interested and experienced in participation;
- develop useful outputs for the EC funded PATH project; and to
- bring a novel and relevant session to the conference.

In terms of what they would do, the facilitator told the participants that they would work through an H-form to develop three issues of interest to PATH:

- participation in policymaking
- scale and participation
- representation in participation

Going through the H-form would lead to ideas and suggestions which would be used in action planning in the second part of the workshop.

In terms of what would happen to the outputs participants were told that outputs would:

- be written up and published in the conference proceeding
- inform the Policy Briefs that will be written as part of the PATH project
- be sent to policy makers connected to or interested in the PATH project

Following the introduction the facilitator gave a sequence of instructions to while participants worked in their groups. The instructions are set out below. Participants were told how much time they had to complete each task. A timer was set and went off when the time was up, at which point instructions for the next task were given. Participants were asked to write any concerns, assumptions and comments they had concerning the workshop on the commentary card provided.

3.1. Instructions

The following instructions were given to participants:

1. Using a pen (please all use a different coloured pen), mark your individual score on the line between 0 and 10 for the question "How effectively are the public involved in policy development?" (1 minute)
2. Each individual should take 3 sticky-notes. On each, write a positive reason for your score. Why did you not give a zero score? Stick these on the right side of the paper under "Positive reasons". (5 minutes)
3. Take 3 more sticky notes. On each write a negative reason for your score. Why did you not give the maximum possible score? Stick these on the left side of the paper under "negative reasons". (5 minutes)
4. Each individual should read out their positive and negative reasons, without a long discussion, but clarifying the idea if necessary, to the rest of the group. Move the sticky notes around to group similar reasons. Add additional reasons if they arise. (20 minutes)
5. Consider whether your individual score has changed. Using the same coloured pen, mark your new score on the line between 0 and 10. Join your 2 scores with an arrow. (1 minute)
6. Each individual in turn should suggest ONE action that could be taken to improve the score in future. One person should write these actions below the centre line in a grid format with an empty box to the right. (5 minutes)
7. Each of you have 3 votes. Use your votes to show which actions you think would be most effective. You can distribute your votes evenly, put them all against one action, or whatever you feel shows which you think are most effective. (3 minutes)
8. On the table there should be a coloured sheet of paper with 2 headings. Under "Suggested Action" write the action with the most votes. Under "Why is it important?" write why that action is important. Please leave all the papers on the table. These will be used on Wednesday. (2 minutes)

These eight steps together with the introduction took around one hour. Once all the steps had been completed, the participants were told that these issues would be further developed in part 2 of the workshop and given a short break before the two further questions were discussed.

3.2. Two further questions

When participants returned from the break they were asked which of two issues they would like to discuss: scale or representation in the context of participation. Individuals were asked to sit with people who were also interested in this topic. The "scale" groups were given a blank H-form containing the following question:

- How good are participatory methods at involving people at multiple scales?
- The “representation” groups were given a blank H-form with the following question:
- How well are different values represented in participatory processes?

Also on the table was a sheet with full instructions on how to complete the H-form. The groups were asked to go through the H-form at their own pace, following the same procedure as in the previous exercise, and referring to the instruction sheet. Participants were given around 50 minutes to do this.

Once the H-form process was complete, participants were thanked and informed of the second phase of the workshop – action planning – discussed below.

Figure 2 - Conference participants completing the H-form



4. Part 2: Action Planning

The “top” suggested action from each H-form was taken forward to the part 2 – the action planning part of the workshop. Here participants were asked to consider one suggested action at a time and think about who should do what to make it happen, who should be responsible, how they could encourage it to happen, when it should be done and how we would know when it was done (Table 1).

The task for part 2 was to develop 3 action plans which aimed:

1. To improve the participation of the public in developing policy;
2. To improve representation of different values and interests in participatory processes;
3. To enhance the use of participatory methods at multiple scales and levels.

Table 1 - Action planning table

Action	Why?	Who should do what?	How?	When?	Done!
Actions from Monday	Why is it important?	Who should be responsible for what, to make it happen?	How can they do it or encourage it to happen? Resources?	When should it be done?	How will we know when it is done?
1					
2					
3					
4					

The “top” suggested actions were put into plastic wallets together with the reason “Why is it important?” from the H-form session. Four further sheets were included headed: *Who* should be responsible for what, to make it happen? *How* can they do it or encourage it to happen, using what resources? *When* should it be done? How will we know when it is *done*? The wallets were distributed on the conference tables. Participants (in groups) were asked to take a wallet and complete the sheets. Once completed the sheets were stuck on the wall so three large action planning matrices were displayed in the conference plenary, one for each issue (Fig 3).

Figure 3 - Action planning matrix to improve the participation of the public in developing policy



In concluding the action planning session participants were reminded that the action plans would be written up and published in the conference proceeding; would inform the Policy Briefs written as part of the PATH project, and would be

sent to policy makers connected to or interested in the PATH project. Participants were thanked for their participation.

5. Saboteurs

Consistent with good practice in designing participatory exercises, the workshop organisers developed a strategy to deal with “saboteurs”. A saboteur is a participant who does not want to “play ball”. This may include, not wanting to respond the question given, not being willing or able to work with a particular group of people, not liking the structure of the session and so on. There may be good reasons for being a saboteur, but whatever they are the facilitator needs a strategy to address their concerns and behaviour so they do not sabotage the whole exercise and outputs.

The possibility of saboteurs was anticipated and action taken so that any disruption would be minimised. First, the introduction to the session was carefully planned and reminded participants that participation was messy, constrained, the questions were never quite right and so on but it was still worthwhile. The aim here was to acknowledge potential problems, but ask participants to engage anyway, as they ask their participants to do. Second, we provided commentary sheets. The aim was that individuals or groups could write comments, concerns and queries on the sheets, i.e. make their point, but still get on with the exercise. Third, we had blank H-forms in reserve so that if a group or individual did not like the question, they would be given their own blank H-form and asked to devise their own question and complete the H-form with that question. Finally, facilitators were prepared to be flexible, think on their feet and respond to the needs of an individual or group as it arose.

The aim of all of these strategies was to encourage any saboteur groups or individuals to take part in the exercise whatever their concerns. This meant that organisers would still benefit from their knowledge and experience. It would minimise disruption to the group, and ensure outputs from the session were not compromised.

In the PATH workshop a saboteur group did indeed form. They felt (legitimately) that the representation question was too context dependent for them to respond to sensibly. They were offered a blank H-form and the opportunity to devise their own question. They did discuss a new and relevant question: “If we were to design a participatory process, how would we design it in a way that ensures unequal values are represented?”. This group recorded their discussion delivering a useful contribution despite not following the approach of the rest of the workshop.

6. Reflections on the workshop

The feedback from the participants on the workshops sessions was positive. For example one participant wrote: “The plenary participatory workshop was very enjoyable, stimulating and hopefully useful”. Another that: “I really enjoyed the structured discussion [in the workshops] – something that rarely happens at conferences. It enables me to learn a lot from people I would not otherwise have met.”

However, there are some issues related to the process that deserve attention and others that might be highlighted for possible future implementation of the method. First, the question used for the H-form and leading to the action plan is crucial and difficult to get “right”. Questions are inevitably context dependent,

and will be more relevant to some participants than others. In a time-limited setting such as a conference with different participants working together, devising a question that allows people to get started and does not require a long discussion about what the question means is vital.

Every person was given the opportunity to write down just one action on the H-form. Participants voted on the suggestion they preferred from their group to select which one went forward to the action planning stage. This approach has the effect of closing down the number of options for action planning and impacts on the shape of the final plan. Whilst this was considered the best solution considering the time-constraints and the number of participants involved, alternative approaches might lead to more innovative action plans. For example, perhaps participants could be asked to offer as many suggested actions as they can think of. These might then be whittled down through voting or discussion once all participants had considered each suggested action. One participant commented that although his action was selected to go forward to action planning he felt that it was because it was simple and easy to explain rather than because it was the "best" action put forward in his group. Equally, the action chosen might be related to the characteristics of the proposer and their behaviour in the group rather than the action itself.

The approach taken in allocating the action planning wallets to participants meant that the person who suggested the action in the first place, or even a participant who was in the group where the action was suggested, was not necessarily involved in the action planning of it. This meant that the action planning group had to interpret the action before beginning planning. This was found to be a difficult task in itself. It is impossible to say with the information we have whether the "correct" interpretation was made and then developed. One way to account for this would be to ensure that the person who suggested the action was a member of the group that went on to develop it further.

In the format that we used, this would have been logistically complicated because every participant was involved in two separate H-form discussions dealing with different questions, while the action planning was condensed into a single session. Splitting the action planning into two sessions would have made it easier for participants to follow 'their' suggested actions from the H-form discussions into the action planning. Other ideas that could have improved this aspect include:

- Posting a table layout showing where each action would be discussed, or allowing participants to pull a desired wallet off the wall for action planning
- Holding a plenary 'report back' of each group's priority action after part 1

At least one participant wrote a new suggested action into the matrix during the action planning stage of the workshop. This as it circumvented the 'group approval' aspect of the H-form discussion and voting process, although it is a strength of the process that participants continued to generate new material outside of the official process. This was included in the outputs of the workshops, but a procedure might have been agreed before hand on dealing with such an eventuality.

This relates to a broader question surrounding how representative the outputs of the activity are of the conference participants as a whole. In part 1, each idea was voted on and its priority was (more or less) agreed by 5-6 people. Those ideas that progressed through the action planning stage were interpreted, thought through and essentially vetted by another 5-6 people. While these group discussions did grant some degree of legitimacy to the suggested actions, at no point did all 120 participants discuss or approve the list of suggested action

points, nor the matrices outlining how they should be taken forward. Therefore, it would not be strictly true to present the results of the HAP as a 'conference output' with the implication that they were agreed by the participants as a group. Producing a coherent and mutually acceptable set of outcomes represents one of the challenges of 'the participatory processes attempted here.

Publication of the conference proceeding gives us some scope to address this issue since participants have the opportunity to provide critical feedback and provide a check on the interpretation of participants' ideas, identify missing points, and add perspectives that may not have been raised or considered during the session itself. Although the final output can still not truly be considered representative of all conference delegates.

7. Conclusion

The PATH plenary workshop developed and implemented the HAP method in the hope of realising benefits for a number of parties. Many participants said they benefited from talking with and learning from people they might otherwise not have met. Organisers (and project co-ordinators) were able to make the most of the expertise and experience of participants, produced outputs from the process, as well as feeding into overall project outputs. There may also be benefits to Funders and policy makers in the (hopefully) insightful and innovative suggestions and action plans. Although there is ongoing work to do in terms of faithfully translating the outputs into a product that will be both acceptable to participants and meaningful to funders / policy makers.

This workshop added to the dialogue on the opportunities and challenges of using participatory means to develop action-oriented outputs, particularly involving a (relatively) large group of participants. Careful design and implementation is essential, but evidence from the PATH conference shows that utilising the HAP approach can offer multiple benefits to participants, facilitators and policymakers..

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