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Participatory Approaches in Knowledge Production: The Development of a Guidance for the Netherlands Environmental Assessment Agency

1 The project

This contribution deals with participatory approaches in practice. The project ‘participation in knowledge production under conditions of uncertainty’ is being conducted by Maria Hage and supervised by Pieter Leroy, both of Nijmegen University (The Netherlands) and Arthur Petersen (MNP).

The aim of the project is to develop a guideline on stakeholder participation for the Netherlands Environmental Assessment Agency (MNP), respectively for the organization of participation within the process of its environmental reporting. In this project, stakeholder participation is perceived as a mean to create and integrate expertise originating from stakeholders in scientific assessments. Publication is planned for autumn 2006.

2 The MNP and stakeholder participation

The primary task of the MNP is “to advise the Dutch government on a wide variety of environmental issues from a scientific base built on knowledge and expertise” (MNP 2006). With its environmental balances and outlooks the MNP supports policy-makers in developing, implementing, evaluating and enforcing environmental policy.

Due to the legal position of the MNP, stakeholder participation has a special meaning for them. MNP products are meant to support decision making processes, but are explicitly not part of the decision making itself. As a consequence, stakeholder participation organized for the MNP is focused on knowledge production and on increasing the social acceptability of its reports.

3 Theoretical background

The aim of the project is to create a product for use in practice, a guideline for stakeholder participation. Nevertheless it is mainly inspired by two theoretical approaches: on the one hand by the discussion on (the need for) new modes of the production of knowledge (Gibbons, Limoges et al. 1994), on the other hand by the concept of ‘boundary work’ (Gieryn 1983; Gieryn 1995).

The characteristics of many environmental problems are a real challenge to classic scientific knowledge. In circumstances of intrinsic uncertainties and high stakes, the traditional fact/value distinction is called into question. As a consequence, new ways of knowledge production and quality control are needed (Funtowicz and Ravetz 1993). Participatory knowledge production is perceived as such a new way to foster the ‘social robustness’ of knowledge. Because of the state of the MNP as an intermediary institution between science and policy, a lot of ‘boundary work’ can be observed at the MNP. Boundary work means the ongoing process of negotiation of the borders between the two spheres. As a consequence, stakeholder participation has to pay attention to the different, sometimes conflicting rules of these two spheres. Is the main goal of stakeholder participation “democracy” or “quality”?

We argue that this leads to a tricky trade-off situation in which choices have to be made.

4 The guideline for stakeholder participation

The guideline has to be suitable for different contexts, products and modes of assessments for the MNP. It cannot be a recipe book therefore, but rather it is intended to stimulate systematic reflection on the following questions:

1. Why do I aim for stakeholder participation?
2. What must its content be?
3. Which stakeholders do I need for this?
4. How much stakeholder participation do I want?
5. What methods are suitable for the chosen goals and chosen stakeholders?

The guideline on stakeholder participation tries to help to identify the main goals, motives and contexts of participation in different environmental assessments. While keeping existing resources in mind, it offers advice on designing participatory knowledge production to meet realistic expectations.

4.1 Goals for participation (why)

First of all, the guideline assists to identify the goal(s) of the participatory process. It distinguishes four categories of main goals:

- Goals of quality of knowledge
- Instrumental goals
- Democratic goals
- Goals of Change

There is no participatory design that could possibly serve all purposes. One has to recognize that there is even a certain trade-off between goals of quality of knowledge and goals of democratic design of participatory approaches. Hence, the guideline helps with the choices that have to be made.

4.2 Mode of assessment (what about)

It is important to take a closer look at the assessment itself. The guideline describes the consequences for stakeholder participation for the different types of assessments. As a general rule, it can be said that the closer the assessment comes to the national daily politics, the lesser space there will be for stakeholder participation. For example, a Global Environmental Outlook for the next 30 years will provide more opportunity for stakeholder participation than an ex post evaluation of a hot item like the Dutch national manure policy. In the latter case it is necessary to fathom the political space and to define the scope of stakeholder participation.

4.3 Selection of stakeholders (who)

How to choose the right participants for the participatory process? And should representation be a leading criterion? The guideline says that it depends on the goals of the participatory process and on which kinds of participants are needed. Relevant qualities could be

- Influence
- Knowledge
- Representation

- Communication skills
- That participants do not know each other in advance.

If enhancing the legitimization of the outcome is the main goal, then influence of the participants is an important criterion. If mainly knowledge production is the goal, then influence is less important than knowledge. In this case, representation is not necessary. To trigger a process of change, it is crucial to escape from old patterns and walk on new paths: in that case, inviting people that do not know each other can be helpful.

Apart from the question what the stakeholders can do for the MNP, it is all important to raise the question “what has the participatory process to offer for the stakeholders?” How can participants be attracted and motivated?

4.4 Degrees of participation (how much)

Various scientific and societal discussions are dealing with the question what real participation means, and what it does not. Instead, the new guideline asks: what level of participation can be appropriate, keeping in mind circumstances and resources? How and when can the results of interaction have impact on the reporting process? What can be promised to the participants and what better not? A known metaphor here is “the ladder of participation” (Arnstein 1969) that has been rebuilt to suit the MNP context of knowledge production.

4.5 Methods (how)

Thinking about which methods to use is the last step in planning participatory processes. The method has to fit the context, and not vice versa. Most methods do include a certain element of decision making. Since stakeholder participation for the MNP is not directly linked to the decision making part of the policy process but to its knowledge base, many methods are not suitable in this case. The guideline gives an overview on some relevant methods. In the tool catalogue, a lot of practical information is supplied.

The scientists who work for the MNP are well-trained and excellent professionals. But there are no experts in organizing stakeholder participation. For this reason the guideline advises on when and where to get external help. What can they do by themselves, and what should be sourced out?

5 Resources

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