Involving the Public—Participatory Methods and Democratic Ideals

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Involving the Public – Participatory Methods and Democratic Ideals

Participatory methods aim to address controversy over new technologies through public consultation. This paper first describes the emergence of participatory methods within the framework of technology assessment, then provides an overview of the landscape of participatory arrangements; and, finally, discusses participatory methods in relation to different democratic ideals. The article challenges the widespread assumption that participatory methods can function as normatively neutral tools, which can readily be employed in various social and political settings. Through a case study of consensus conferences on GMOs in three European countries, the article investigates the interpretive processes that take place when participatory procedures are applied in new national political settings.

The introduction of new technologies into society, and especially the advent of modern biotechnologies, has often provoked public debate, criticism, and (in some cases) overt opposition. Conflicts between science and technology, on the one hand, and the public on the other, developed during the 1960s and over the following decades, and have been at the centre of a number of social controversies. Partly depending on the national context, these controversies have concerned such issues as nuclear power, the environment, gene technology, food irradiation, information and communication technologies and transport technology. In the 1970s such controversies – and the barriers they raised to technological development and production – led to the emergence of technology assessment (TA) as a discipline. One line of development following the emergence of TA was an attempt to address controversy over new technologies through public consultation.

This new approach to resolving societal conflict over technology led to the development of participatory procedures designed to involve the public in debates – and ultimately in the decision-making process – in relation to controversial technology issues. The past 15 years have seen a marked growth in the use of a variety of participatory arrangements and methods in many European countries. Even though the ideal of participation is high on the political agenda, there seems to be a lack of consensus about what is covered by this somewhat evasive concept and how it should be enacted or enabled. Participatory methods are often described as neutral tools, which can be readily employed in various social and political settings. The question remains, however, whether this is all there is to be said about the processes that take place when participatory procedures are interpreted into new settings.
Our aim in this article is to discuss the implications of interpreting and employing participatory procedures in different national settings. We will begin with a short overview of the way in which developments within the field of TA have given rise to new perceptions of the public, which in turn enabled a landscape of diverse participatory arrangements to be established. We will then discuss how different types of arguments are used to justify the employment of participatory arrangements, and argue for an altogether different approach; one that focuses not so much on the different justifications, but rather on the ways in which these justifications say something about the points of departure from which different actors interpret participatory procedures.

In the remainder of the article we discuss of various models of democracy and the role that these models play in relation to different interpretations of participatory procedures. We report some results of a case study of consensus conferences in three countries, and ask what these show about the way in which the concept of participation is being interpreted and applied in different national settings. Finally, we inquire into the ways that insights from the case study have implications for public participation in the assessment of new technologies.

Technology assessment and shifting perceptions of the public

A central aim of TA activities was to improve the basis of decision making and identify potential areas of future controversy by assessing and predicting the consequences of technologies. The increased focus on TA can be interpreted as an attempt to leave behind an era in which most Western countries have had a *laissez-faire* technology policy. Thus, in the words of Hennen this development can be seen as an attempt to "...'put politics in command', that is, expand the political possibilities of action vis-à-vis the growing dynamics of scientific and technological developments" (Hennen, 1999: 304).

Throughout the 1970s and 1980s TA was institutionalised in the national policy of a number of countries, and institutions facilitating TA activities were established. Among the first such institutions were the US Office for Technology Assessment (OTA), the Netherlands Organisation for Technology Assessment (NOTA, later the Rathenau Instituut), and the Danish Board of Technology (DBT).

In the early stages of TA deployment, there was a tendency to rely on a rather simplistic 'public understanding of science' (PUS) tradition. At the foundation of this approach was the belief that societal controversies over technology were the result of scientific illiteracy among the public. Information about the 'true nature' of science and technology would, it was assumed, eradicate misunderstandings and bring about public acceptance of new technologies. The problem, then, was assumed to be a 'knowledge deficit' among the general public, and the cure was thought to be enlightenment. This resulted in a technocratic approach where decisions about science and technology were still thought to be best addressed at the expert level, and the challenge was viewed as one of passing on information about science and technology to the public (see e.g. Hill
and Michael, 1998). This technocratic approach, which represents the lowest level of involvement of the public in decisions over science and technology, encourages various initiatives, such as popularisation of science and technology, information campaigns, public meetings organised with the purpose of informing or enlightening the public, and so on.

In a reaction to the early PUS approach, constructivist frameworks for handling conflicts between science and technology and the public were developed (see Joss and Durant, 1995, MacKenzie and Wajcman, 1999). The constructivist frameworks recognise that technologies and technological development do not exist in a social vacuum, but are the result of a process of social construction in which all interests should be taken into account and in which all actors should have a say. In the constructivist approach, public participation is not, as suggested in the PUS tradition, a one-way, top-down process. It is a process of interaction between decision makers and the public. However, when we look at the more practical level of participatory arrangements, we find that such processes of interaction are being facilitated in a wide variety of ways and, as Arnstein (1969) argues, with varying degrees of public engagement and involvement.

The landscape of participatory arrangements

Participatory arrangements represent a mixed category of methods and activities that share the basic characteristic of, in one way or another, involving the public in debates of societal relevance and/or forging a link between the public and the formal processes of decision-making in society. Moreover, these methods go beyond, and qualify, participation of the kind secured through the voting processes of representative democracy. They include a variety of arrangements, from the Swiss extended system of deciding by popular vote to citizen juries or consensus conferences (see Table 1 for an overview).

These tools vary in respect of how participation is facilitated, who the method invites to participate, and for what purposes participation is desired. In her outline of a typology of participation, Arnstein (1969) argues that a critical approach should be taken as to the array of participatory methods and to the different degrees to which they enable involvement and interaction. She places participatory methods and initiatives on a scale ranging from non-participation, across degrees of symbolic participation (tokenism) to degrees of citizen power. At one end of the scale, participatory arrangements involving non-participation are initiated merely as a means of legitimising decisions which have already been

1 Although these ideas are characteristic of the early phases of TA, they continued to prevail in connection with biotechnology into the 1990s. Indeed the second wave of public controversy in this area can to some extent be interpreted as a result of the limitations in the one-way, top-down strategy - a strategy pursued in most European countries during the 1980s (see e.g. BECAGP, 1997).

2 Although more than 30 years old, Arnstein’s much-cited article proves to have continued relevance, not least because it highlights the need to go beyond persuading concepts which - then and now - have proved capable of covering up cases of sheer manipulation. Arnstein stresses the importance of investigating the potential for different procedures to enable actual influence.
made and where no real influence is possible. Symbolic participation occurs in methods or arrangements in which the aim is to inform, appease or consult the public. Public hearings and surveys may fall into this category. Arnstein (1969) argues that information or consultation can in some cases be the point of departure for actual participatory processes, but she emphasises that as participatory tools they cannot stand alone.

Table 1: A selection of participatory arrangements, their set-up, procedure, and mode of participation.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of arrangement</th>
<th>Set-up and procedure</th>
<th>Mode of participation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Consensus conference</td>
<td>A lay panel sets the agenda on a given issue and interrogates a panel of experts. The lay panel must reach consensus on the issues debated</td>
<td>Selected laypersons in a panel (10-15). The lay panel receive a basic training in the issue in question</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Citizens’ forum</td>
<td>Set-up similar to the consensus conference, but minority expressions are permitted</td>
<td>Selected laypersons in a panel (approximately 25). The lay panel receive a basic training in the issue in question</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Future workshop</td>
<td>Participants are guided through a structured debate in phases of critique, visioning and realization</td>
<td>Selected laypersons (5-20) participate in a workshop</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scenario workshop</td>
<td>Participants are guided through a structured debate about different scenarios in phases of critique, visioning and realization</td>
<td>Participants (5-20) represent the various stakeholders</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Technology Delphi studies/Technology foresight</td>
<td>Through a survey of stakeholders, opinions about the future are gathered; panels subsequently draw conclusions and formulate recommendations on this basis</td>
<td>Groups of up to 2000 stakeholders (or more) targeted in a survey and selected representatives from user groups in panels</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Public Hearing</td>
<td>Public presentation of an issue or plan in an open forum; subsequent opportunity for comments</td>
<td>Interested citizens or stakeholders</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Focus group</td>
<td>Individuals are gathered for a focused interview about the issue in question</td>
<td>A number of laypersons or stakeholders are gathered in groups of (typically) 6-10 persons</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Referendum</td>
<td>Vote on the issue in question</td>
<td>All affected citizens in a region or nation</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: The term stakeholders is used here to refer to actors with vested interests as distinguished from lay persons who represent members of the general public.

At the other end of the scale are methods which to a greater extent allow for a two-way process of interaction, where decision makers and the public are engaged in dialogue. Such processes will, potentially, affect both parties and lead to decisions that, at least in theory, are more socially acceptable and robust. Following Arnstein, we might say that these types of initiatives are characterised by their capacity to make real public influence or citizen control possible. Methods like consensus conferences and citizen juries must be
said to belong to this end of the scale. Participatory processes within this interactive understanding may be defined as "...deliberation on the pressing issues of concern to those affected by the decisions at issue" (Fischer, 2000: 32).

The justification of participatory arrangements

Participatory methods, then, can involve and engage the public in different ways and to varying degrees. There also appears to be a range of justifications for initiating participatory arrangements. Some distinguish between the ideal and the pragmatic bases from which to argue for participatory procedures (see e.g. Klüver et al., 2000). Here, 'ideal' refers to a conception of participation as an inherent feature of democracy. 'Pragmatic' arguments aim to justify participatory arrangements as tools to handle issues which pose societal problems. Similar distinctions are made by Rowe and Frewer (2000), who separate participation as recognition of basic human rights and participation as a response to public protest and lack of trust. Again, Marjolein and Rijkens-Klomp (2002) distinguish between participation as a natural part of democracy (and as a goal in itself), and participation as a means of influencing the decision-making process.

We shall argue for a slightly different distinction, emphasising the different points of departure from which actors in different settings interpret and employ the concept of participation. Thus we take into account both the types of arguments for participation, which are rooted in political realities and the handling of conflicts, as well as the types of arguments for participation, which refer to different perceptions of the role of the public in relation to decision-making processes. In other words, when evaluating the use of the consensus conference as a participatory procedure we do not focus merely on a distinction between ideal or pragmatic bases from which to argue for participation. Rather, we try to go beyond these categories and investigate what motivates a pragmatic approach, and what is implied by viewing participation as being part and parcel of a democratic ideal. The idea that different actors would share the same perception of participation as an inherent feature of democracy, and that this would serve as justification for participatory arrangements, is rooted in a taken-for-granted assumption about the universal meaning of the concept of participation.

Even though, as we have argued above, there seems to be no straightforward way of understanding participatory arrangements, there is still a widespread tendency to assume that the concept of participation itself can be readily interpreted in different cultural, political, and social contexts. However, the socio-cultural meanings, associations and values that are being ascribed to this conceptually fuzzy and seemingly all-inclusive concept, vary considerably. To put it differently, participation is the one thing that everyone - from policy makers to NGOs and community workers - agrees we should have more of, but there seems to be little or no reflection as to whether we really mean the same thing when we talk about participation. It is interesting to note the way in which participation is one of the few concepts, which are inherently and automatically associated with positive meanings and qualities\(^3\).

\(^3\) Although in recent years critiques questioning the status of 'participation' as a taken for granted ideal have surfaced: see, e.g. Cooke and Kothari, 2001.
As Michael Ignatieff (1992) has noted, ‘community’ too is a concept, which bears these inherently positive connotations, something which prompted him to speak of ‘community’ as a “dishonest word” in the sense that it can cover up underlying power relations or manipulative strategies. The concept of participation can be said to share these potentially deceptive characteristics, and this emphasises the need to go beyond the concept to understand what happens when it is interpreted and employed in different settings.

The role of public participation in the light of different models of democracy

One type of setting which, as we shall argue, is of great significance to the interpretation of participatory processes, is the national political culture of a country in which participatory arrangements are employed. To understand how different political cultures generate different types of perception and expectation of participatory processes, it helps to look at the different models of democracy that characterise these political cultures. In a case study of consensus conferences in three countries, we have explored how different democratic models can be linked to different notions of democratic legitimacy, different views of laypersons and experts, and, not least the different types of motivation to set up participatory procedures. Before we discuss these studies below, we will continue with a brief overview of models of democracy and their implications for how the concept of participation is perceived.

We distinguish between three models of democracy thus: procedural, communitarian and deliberative. Within the frame of procedural democracy, democratic legitimacy is attained through the workings of fair and transparent procedures, and is connected with political equality as expressed in the votes of fairly elected representatives. Within the communitarian notion of democracy, legitimacy is attained when political decisions are rooted in community’s basic, common values. Whereas, within the model of deliberative democracy, legitimacy is created through the operation of a deliberative procedure in which different actors are given an equal chance to make their voices heard.

In each of these models of democracy there is a general acceptance of deliberative processes as a way of strengthening the basis of a democracy. Yet the participatory procedures, which are employed to enable public deliberation to take place, play very different roles within these democratic models. The following outline of the democratic models indicates how the models are linked to the political cultures in France, Norway, and Denmark (the three countries in our study of the employment of consensus conferences).

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4 The study was part of the EU 5th framework programme project ‘Ethical Bio-TA Tools’ (QLG6-CT-2002-02594).
5 This discussion draws on a paper by Jensen, 2003.
6 Note that in linking models of democracy to national political cultures, we aim to reflect the fact that certain models are predominant in either Norwegian, or French, or Danish political culture. We are aware that elements of each of the democratic models may figure in all three political cultures to some extent, and thus we are not suggesting that any of the countries has a one-one relationship with a model of democracy.
In France, a notion of procedural democracy permeates the political system and political culture. The ideal of political equality and of transparency in political procedures is paramount, and this principle of equality is respected precisely through the procedures to elect representatives. The legacy of the French Revolution looms large in the sense that no one should be accorded a special position in this political system – not even citizens engaging in participatory procedures. Although traces of each of the notions of legitimacy may be detected in most political cultures, the communitarian and deliberative notions are clearly salient in both Danish and Norwegian political culture. The communitarian notion, which accords democratic legitimacy to decisions based upon a community's basic values, finds expression in Norwegian political culture.

Here, it might be useful to elaborate the distinction between communitarian and procedural notions of legitimacy by asking what is perceived to be society's moral commitment in different political cultures. The philosopher Ronald Dworkin makes a distinction between procedural commitment and substantive commitment. A procedural commitment, as found in France, is a commitment to deal fairly and equally with each other, regardless of how we conceive our ends (Dworkin 1978). In a sense, this means that in the procedural notion of legitimacy, no particular conception of the good life can be formulated politically, but only a set of rules and procedures that determine how citizens deal with each other in a democracy.

A substantive commitment, on the other hand, can be understood as a commitment to agree upon what we conceive as common goals and on what we think is worth striving for as a community. This type of commitment is prominent in Norwegian political culture, where politics is seen as something that should reflect shared values and ideas, and where trust is not merely placed in the workings of normatively neutral procedures.

Although it is also hospitable to the communitarian notion, Danish political culture is characterised by a strong attachment to the deliberative notion of democratic legitimacy. Public deliberation is a means by which citizens can work out common ideas, norms and values, and therefore deliberative procedures are democratically legitimate in the sense that they further an inclusive debate in which the voices of the public are heard. The deliberative democracy which can be said to characterise Danish political culture can be described as a democratic order in which citizens:

"share a commitment to the resolution of problems of collective choice through public reasoning, and regard their basic institutions as legitimate insofar as they establish the framework for free public deliberation" (Cohen, 1997: 72).

The following section shows that, although public participation might be said to represent an ideal relationship between the citizens and authorities within these different political cultures.

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9 For a discussion of proceduralist versus communitarian models of democracy, see also Habermas 1996.

10 For discussions of deliberative democracy, see also Bohman and Rehg, 1997; Fishkin and Laslett, 2003.
types of democracy, the concept of participation is endowed with a variety of meanings and values to the extent that it poses a real challenge to the employment of participatory arrangements.

Case study: Consensus conferences in a cross-national perspective

This section focuses on the results of a study of three participatory consensus conferences on GM foods. The conferences took place in Norway (1996), France (1998) and Denmark (1999)\(^{11}\).

Let us begin by briefly describing the consensus conference model\(^ {12}\). Although the set-up of participatory consensus conferences may vary slightly from one conference to another, the conferences do share organisational features. One is that an involved panel of lay persons pass through a learning process in which they are informed about the issue at hand, and about the pros and cons of the matter. Typically this process includes lectures and the personal study of selected documents and articles. Using this information the lay panel set up a list of questions that they feel need to be addressed if they are to form an opinion on the matter in hand. Next, experts are chosen to consider these questions and present their answers to the lay panel at a public conference. Finally, the lay panel withdraws and considers the issue. It then presents its conclusions in a document which is presented to the public on the final day of the conference.

Our interview data show that in France, where the procedural model of democracy seems to be prevalent, there is pronounced suspicion towards the idea of a consensus conference. Several interviewees found the model to be incompatible with the ideals of a representative democracy. They stated that political decisions which were influenced by non-expert advice or input from ordinary lay people would be seen to have no democratic legitimacy. The general belief was that, in casting their votes, members of the public had already elected their representatives in parliament, and that, therefore, any public influence at this level would detract from the political equality ensured by the fair and transparent procedures of representative democracy. Public participation at the regional or local level, or in the institutional setting of NGOs, was favoured over participatory processes at the level of parliamentary politics, where it was believed that public deliberation had no legitimate role to play.

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\(^{11}\) The case study involved 25 qualitative interviews with conference organisers, members of project groups, members of expert panels and lay panels, as well as facilitators. Studies of final reports, evaluations, press releases, and other documents relevant in relation to the conferences also form part of our case study.

\(^{12}\) We are referring here to the lay panel based consensus conference, widely referred to as ‘the Danish model’, which represents a further development from the original expert based consensus conferences of the US Office of Technology Assessment (OTA). The Danish Board of Technology (DBT) developed their method in the mid 1980’s and the first participatory consensus conference was organised by the DBT in 1987 on the topic “Gene technology in industry and agriculture” (see the DBT web page www.tekno.dk for a comprehensive list of Danish consensus conferences).
As we have argued above, the communitarian model of democracy seems to have had a powerful impact on Norwegian political culture. This impact is evident in the fact that for political decisions to attain democratic legitimacy in Norway they must originate in the ideals, morals, and values of the general community. Here, then, the legitimacy and validity of a participatory procedure such as the consensus conference is assured, precisely because such conferences provide a forum in which lay people's opinions, perspectives, and values can be allowed to influence political decision-making. The link with parliamentary politics is exactly what gives the conference its legitimacy, since in Norwegian political culture 'real' participation means (as one interviewee put it) "bringing common everyday values straight to the centre of politics". Thus, here we see ideas about the legitimacy of participatory processes, which are entirely different from those prevalent in French political culture.

The considerable appeal of the deliberative notion of democracy in Danish political culture translates into a clear focus on the ability of the consensus conference to further opportunities for open and unbiased debate and hence strengthen the basis of public deliberation. Among other things, this means that participation is seen as an end in itself – that is, as a way for people to exercise their right to make their voices heard. In Denmark, as in Norway, the fact that the conference is linked directly to parliamentary politics is viewed as a source of legitimacy. For, among Danes, there is a perception that transparent dialogue between citizens and political decision makers is one of the hallmarks of active democracy.

These three national case studies point to significant discrepancies in ideas about what real participation is, how it is achieved, and at what level this involvement should take place. These cases show that a country's dominant model of democracy can lead to very different ideas about when, how and to what extent, public participation is seen to be desirable, appropriate, or even legitimate.

What is expected to be gained from involving the public?

Another aspect that can be explored from the perspective of different democratic models is the way in which a range of different perceptions of the public feed into, and find expression in, the initiating of consensus conferences. In other words, what role, or roles, can be played by lay people in relation to this participatory procedure and why is their contribution thought to be important? What is expected to be gained by involving the public in deliberations over, in this case, GM foods?

In France, there appears to be widespread agreement that the aim of involving lay people in these debates is principally to introduce them to expert knowledge to which they would otherwise lack access. The participation of lay people in the conference was seen to be important primarily as a means of getting members of the public 'up to speed' with experts, thus raising the level of the broader debate. Meanwhile, in the Norwegian conference there was a tendency to see laypeople's participation as something that brought entirely new, and more holistic, everyday perspectives into the debate. Public participation in the form of a consensus conference is seen as one way to secure a connection with the voice of the people, whose input is seen to be an invaluable contribution to political decision-making processes.
In Denmark, it seems that the importance of public participation is largely taken for granted, with the legitimacy of such participation is viewed as almost unquestionable. The participation of lay people was seen, by some interviewees, as an enactment of the duties and rights of citizens in a democracy, and as a way of ensuring that the voices of all types of actors are allowed to influence the debate. In the Danish case, the tendency to value participation as such seemed to be an inherent part of the self-image, or of the national identity. Indeed, several Danish interviewees spoke of participation as something that is closely connected to the "Danish way of doing things". This suggests that socio-cultural and historical developments - in this case, for example, the fact that Denmark is the place of origin of specific types of participatory arrangements - influence dominant ideas of what real participation is and, perhaps more importantly, of what it ought to be.

**Perspectives for public participation in the assessment of new technologies**

In this brief presentation of our case study we have aimed to illustrate that participatory procedures are not neutral tools. Nor do they have stable, clear-cut meanings or implications, which can be readily 'translated' from country to country. Even though the ideal of participation might seem to be the same across the board - if one consults the textbook statements of aims and goals and accept them at face value - significant lapses and discrepancies appear when one scratches the surface. Investigations of the way in which the concept is interpreted, and of what is thought to be the purpose and legitimacy of it, reveals differing and sometimes opposing views on the motivations, meanings and values that are associated with participation in different settings.

Accordingly, the role that can be played by public participation in relation to the assessment of new and controversial technologies in different national settings must be carefully considered. If perceptions of participation in relation to democratic ideals vary as dramatically between countries as our case study suggests, it is important to take into account those conceptions of democracy and democratic legitimacy that are dominant in the political culture into which the participatory procedure is being introduced.

**References**


