



Strategies and Tools for Effective Public Participation

Ajit Krishnaswamy

FORREX Forum for Research and Extension in Natural Resources, Burnaby, Canada

Summary

This paper introduces the principles and best practices of public participation, tools that can be used in the different stages of a participatory process, and strategies to assess the effectiveness of the process. Public participation is widely recognized as a critical aspect in a variety of public accountability, policy, regulatory, and environmental processes. It is sometimes a regulatory requirement. Public participation is also needed to develop guidelines and ethical standards such as those needed for the care and use of animals in science. Despite the need for public participation, few policy and decision makers, managers, and scientists involved in these processes have formal training or professional development opportunities to build their capacity in planning for and implementing participatory processes. Many of these professionals “do” participation every day, but many do not have the opportunity to reflect on their practice or to contemplate ways to do it better. The paper is designed to offer this opportunity and to introduce useful knowledge and tools that could help professionals and scientists engage the public to make sound policy and management decisions.

Keywords: public participation, direct and indirect tools, participation continuum, breadth and depth of tools

1 Introduction

Public participation is widely recognized as a critical aspect in a variety of public accountability, policy, regulatory, and environmental processes. It is sometimes a regulatory requirement. Through effective public participation, the processes and outcomes of planning, policy, and decision-making are expected to be more efficient, equitable, and sustainable. Scientists who conduct or use alternatives to animal-based experiments need public participation skills to ensure that their work considers societal demands on animal use in science.

Research and experience from natural resource and health management sectors worldwide have proven that public participation leads to better decisions and, by providing local or independent sources of information and examining alternative management strategies, it builds trust. It also reduces uncertainties, delays, conflicts, and legal costs.

Despite this, few policy and decision makers, managers, and scientists involved in these processes have formal training or professional development opportunities to build their capacity in planning for and implementing participatory processes.

2 Goals

The goals of this article are to assist professionals, decision-makers, managers, and scientists in developing:

- an understanding of basic concepts and best practices of participation;
- familiarity with different tools that can be used for effective public participation, and an awareness of which tools are appropriate under different circumstances; and

- strategies to assess the effectiveness of the participatory processes.

The article focuses on answering these questions:

- *What* is public participation?
- *Why* do we need to do public participation?
- *Who* should participate?
- *How* do we do it, that is, what tools are available?
- *When* and where do we use a specific tool?

The paper describes the six “learning” modules of the public participation curriculum (Ambus and Krishnaswamy, 2009):

1. The many facets of participation
2. Benefits, challenges, and best practices
3. The context and purpose of participation
4. Identifying who participates
5. Planning to evaluate
6. Tools for participation

Each module will be discussed separately in the sections below.

Module 1: The many facets of participation

The learning outcomes of this module are to:

- articulate a clear definition of participation; and
- identify different levels of participation in decision-making processes.

Participation is... “various forms of direct public involvement where people, individually or through organized groups, can exchange information, express opinions and articulate interests, and have the potential to influence decisions or the outcome of specific... issues” (UN FAO 2000 cited in Beckley et al., 2005, p. 14). It is where individual, communities, and stakeholder



groups can exchange information, articulate interests, and have the potential to influence decisions or the outcome of natural management issues (Means et al., 2002; DSE, 2005a).

It is a two-way process between the public and experts or managers and should not be confused with the one-way flow of information in public relations exercises. Participation is a willingness to respect and give space to other people’s views. Participation may not be ideal for many situations. But one should not claim that they are doing participation when in fact they are not or if the situation is not appropriate for participation.

Participatory approaches are often classified along a continuum (Beckley et al., 2005; Arnstein, 1969; Auditor General of British Columbia, 2008; IAP2, 2007a). Figure 1 describes the different stages in the continuum of public participation along with examples of tools that are suitable for each stage. The “continuum” spanning nominal participation (e.g., information exchange) to full participation (e.g., co-management), helps conceptualize the level of participation expected when using a particular tool. A person in a public participation process should be aware where their participatory experience or approach falls along the continuum. This awareness will enhance the transparency of the participatory process. It will also help the practitioner select tools suitable for a participatory process.

Participation encompasses a variety of approaches, processes, and tools. There is no one correct way to “do” participation; it is an art and a craft and requires practice. Nevertheless, there are some principles and best practices that help to devise effective participatory processes, which will be discussed in the next section.

Module 2: Benefits, challenges, and best practices

The learning outcomes of this module are to:

- recognize the benefits and common challenges of participation; and
- understand best practices of public participation.

There are both benefits and challenges to participation (Beckley et al., 2005; DSE, 2005a). Practitioners should be aware of these when planning a participatory process.

Some of the benefits of public participation are:

- participatory decisions are more inclusive of different perspectives and values;
- participation can result in better, more informed decisions;
- participation can generate durable and sustainable solutions; and
- participation lends legitimacy and encourages compliance with decisions.

Some of the challenges involved in participatory processes are:

- participation takes more time, effort, and resources;
- participation may achieve “lowest common denominator” results; and
- if poorly done, participation can exacerbate existing conflicts.

Also, a stakeholder-driven public participation process often responds to organized interest groups and may not lead to the same results as a more general public process.

Based on experience and analysis of case studies, practitioners and scholars have identified some principles and best practices for participation (DSE, 2005a). The International Association of

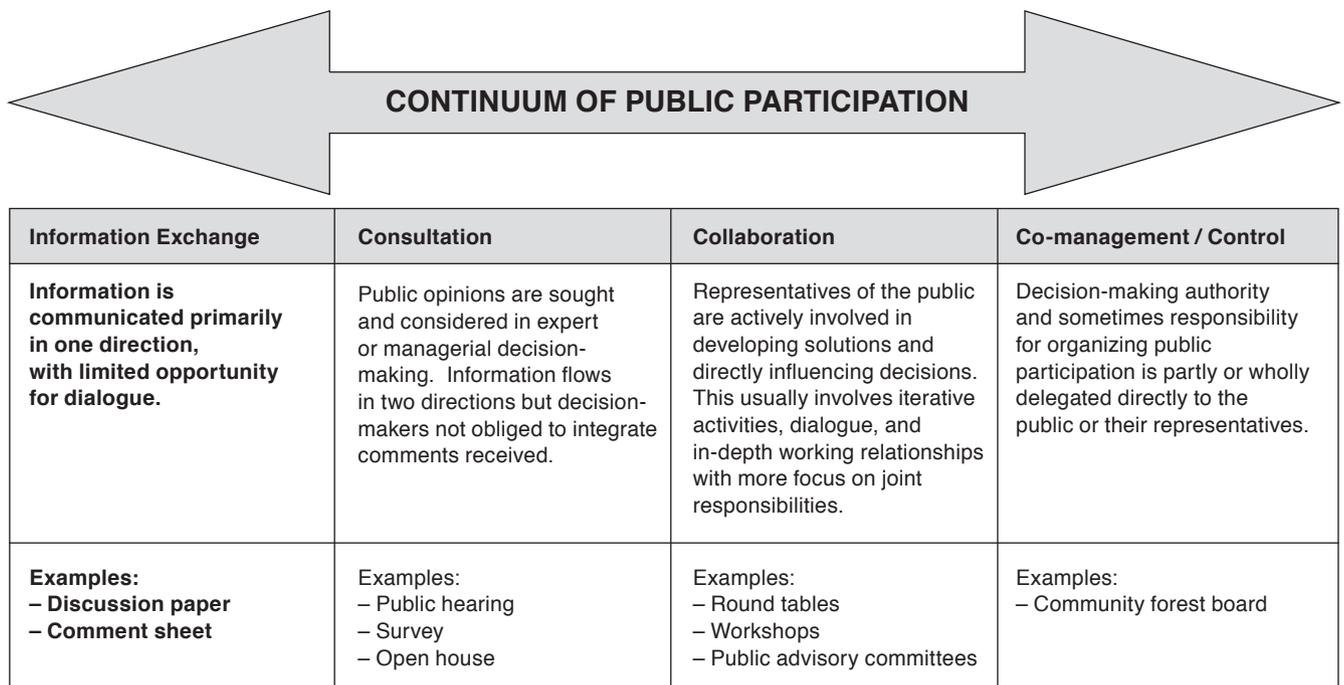


Fig. 1: Continuum of public participation



Public Participation (IAP2, 2007b) has identified core values of participation. The IAP2 core values are:

- Public participation is based on the belief that those who are affected by a decision have a right to be involved in the decision-making process.
- Public participation includes the promise that the public's contribution will influence the decision.
- Public participation promotes sustainable decisions by recognizing and communicating the needs and interests of all participants, including decision makers.
- Public participation seeks out and facilitates the involvement of those potentially affected by or interested in a decision.
- Public participation seeks input from participants in designing how they participate.
- Public participation provides participants with the information they need to participate in a meaningful way.
- Public participation communicates to participants how their input affected the decision.

The International Association of Public Participation (2010) also has a code of ethics for its members. The code is:

1. *Purpose.* We support public participation as a process to make better decisions that incorporate the interests and concerns of all affected stakeholders and meet the needs of the decision-making body.
2. *Role of Practitioner.* We will enhance the public's participation in the decision-making process and assist decision-makers in being responsive to the public's concerns and suggestions.
3. *Trust.* We will undertake and encourage actions that build trust and credibility for the process among all the participants.
4. *Defining the Public's Role.* We will carefully consider and accurately portray the public's role in the decision-making process.
5. *Openness.* We will encourage the disclosure of all information relevant to the public's understanding and evaluation of a decision.
6. *Access to the Process.* We will ensure that stakeholders have fair and equal access to the public participation process and the opportunity to influence decisions.
7. *Respect for Communities.* We will avoid strategies that risk polarizing community interests or that appear to "divide and conquer."
8. *Advocacy.* We will advocate for the public participation process and will not advocate for interest, party, or project outcome.
9. *Commitments.* We ensure that all commitments made to the public, including those by the decision-maker, are made in good faith.
10. *Support of the Practice.* We will mentor new practitioners in the field and educate decision-makers and the public about the value and use of public participation.

Module 3: The context and purpose of participation

The learning outcomes of this module are:

- Recognizing the variety of contextual factors in which public participation occurs.
- Developing clear objectives for effective public participation in planning and decision-making processes.

Effective participation requires careful planning and a clear understanding of why you are doing participation. Why is participation called for and in what context? There are some framing questions that the proponent of a participatory process needs to ask before starting a participatory process (DSE, 2005b). These are:

- WHY? The situation that calls for or has produced the need for public participation.
- WHAT? The objectives or desired outcomes.
- WHO? Profile of potential participants – what are their interests, experiences, values, etc?
- HOW? The approach, tools, and methodology to be used.
- WHEN? The timeframe for public participation.
- WHERE? Site for public participation.

There are numerous factors that affect participation (e.g., social, political, cultural, economic, and personal); all of which should be recognized when developing an effective public participation process. The historical, legal, and policy context needs to be taken into account when developing a public participation program.

A critical step in planning for effective participation is identifying what you want to achieve. Before initiating a participatory process, managers should identify "SMARRT" objectives: Strategic, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant, Realistic, and Time-bound (DSE, 2005b).

Module 4: Identifying who participates

The learning outcome from this module is to identify different interest groups, stakeholders, and citizens and how they may affect (or be affected by) by decisions taken in a public participatory process.

Planning for effective public participation involves identifying who should be involved. This may involve engaging both the "general public" and organized interest groups. The "general public" encompasses diverse values and potentially conflicting perspectives.

Stakeholders in a participatory process are persons or groups that affect or are affected by issues, decisions, or outcomes. Groups and individuals that have a formal or informal stake in resource management decisions include: tenure holders, resource users, local community groups, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and research institutions.

Stakeholders need information regarding how they will benefit by participating. Some of the reasons that could be used to



explain benefits from participating are:

- ownership in design, process, and decisions
- learning and knowledge enhancement through participation
- building relationships and networks
- bringing in diverse perspectives
- reducing conflict
- increasing the chances of success of the decision or solution

The proponents of a participatory process may need to conduct outreach to attract and engage stakeholders, raise the visibility and transparency of the process, and inform stakeholders about progress and results. They also need to build common understanding and trust. Building trust is a necessary stage at the beginning of a participatory process. Building common understanding may involve different stakeholders agreeing to a shared vision. Building trust and common understanding takes a lot of time and patience, thus a participatory process could be long and complex.

For effective participation, people need to recognize and respect that others may view the same issue from different perspectives. The participation practitioner needs to recognize and respect diverse values. One of the core values of participation is to be inclusive as possible (Auditor General of BC, 2008). However, sometimes this is easier said than done. Some participatory processes that are frequently used are not broadly inclusive, despite best efforts.

It is also important to consider the level of influence that different stakeholders have over the process and its outcomes, stakeholders perspectives on issues involved in the process, and past experience with participatory processes (Crosby, 1992). DSE (2005c, pp. 87) suggests using a stakeholder analysis matrix to help identify which stakeholders are the most important to involve in a public participatory process. This matrix plots the level of “importance” of stakeholders against their level of “influence.”

The person(s) and organization(s) responsible for developing the participation process should also be aware of their own interests, biases, and personal involvement in the process (DSE, 2005c).

Module 5: Planning to evaluate

The learning outcome of this module is to identify ways to assess the effectiveness of participatory processes. A critical, yet often missing part of planning for participatory processes is follow-through. A best practice of participation is to plan to

evaluate to “close the loop” and generate valuable feedback and learning. This includes reporting back to participants to identify how their contributions have been included in the decision-making process.

A best practice of public participation is developing a plan to evaluate whether the participatory process was successful. In planning for developing an evaluation framework, the following questions could be considered:

- What is the purpose of the evaluation?
- Who wants to know what? Will different individuals and organizations be interested in different parts of the process?
- What information will you collect and how will you go about gathering it?
- What resources (e.g., time, funding, and expertise) will you need to conduct the evaluation?

The DSE (2005c) “SMAART” objectives described in Module 3 could be used to develop an evaluation framework for a participatory process.

Module 6: Tools for participation

The learning outcomes for this module are to identify a variety of participation tools that can be used to achieve different levels of participation and then present guidelines to select participation tools appropriate for particular situations.

Choosing the appropriate tool (or bundle of tools) for participation will depend on the purpose of participation. The selection of tool(s) also will vary according to:

- Management goals, objectives, and desired outcomes.
- The community profile and the social-political context.
- Project size, budget, timeline, and resources allocated.
- Skills and availability of management team.

Beckley et al., (2005, pp. 27) suggest an organizing framework for classifying various public involvement tools (Fig. 2). They classify tools as either indirect (non face-to-face) or direct (face-to-face) and then further divide them into tools useful for small or large groups. Indirect tools include comment sheets, toll-free lines, referenda, and surveys. Direct tools include public advisory committees, focus groups, workshops, round tables, open houses, and public hearings. Emerging tools are designed to convey information or technical details visually and are usually electronic or web-based. Examples of these are community-based mapping, 3D visualization software, and television based participatory tools (Beckley et al., 2005).

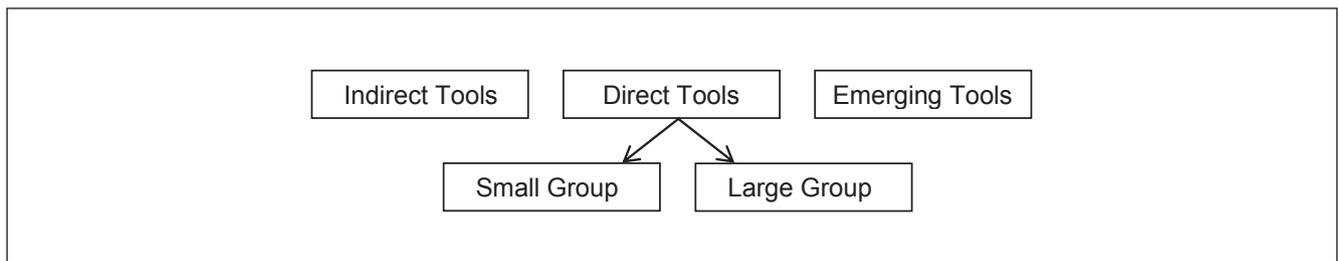


Fig. 2: Organizing framework for public participation tools (Beckley et al., 2005)



The distinction between direct and indirect tools of public participation can be related to the continuum of public participation (Fig. 1). The more collaborative participatory methods tend to be associated with face-to-face techniques (direct tools). However, this general distinction is starting to break down with “emerging” computer-based, “remote” participatory tools such as social media (e.g., Facebook) and web dialogue techniques.

Usually, a suite of tools will be employed in different stages of a public participation process, starting from outreach to stakeholders, building common understanding by defining a shared vision and goals, to evaluation and decision-making. Hislop and Twery (2001) produced a matrix that classified different tools as appropriate for the various stages of a participatory process. Beckley et al., (2005, pp. 45) presented a simplified version of this classification of tools into different stages in the public participation process.

In planning for participation, it is also helpful to evaluate how different tools perform based on criteria and indicators of a successful participatory process. In the context of evaluating a public participatory process, criteria can be broadly defined as values that are inherent in a successful participatory process. Indicators measure aspects of criteria and are used to evaluate the success and appropriateness of tools used in a participatory process to reach desired outcomes or sound decisions.

Table 1 below, adapted from Beckley et al. (2005, pp. 21), classifies criteria and indicators to evaluate participation tools into three core elements: breadth, depth and outcomes. The core element “breadth” addresses the degree to which a process adequately incorporates a broad range of public values into the decision-making process. The “depth” of public participation measures the quality of participation and addresses the levels of

exchange between participants in a participatory process. The third core element, “outcomes,” relates to the goals of the participatory process – how well the process met the shared vision or goals identified by the participants. Often, agencies sponsor a participatory process and have specific goals and expectations for the process. This core element measures the extent to which the process meets those goals and expectations. Beckley et al., 2005 have a reference guide that evaluates a variety of direct and indirect public participation tools against these criteria and indicators.

Specific public participation tools may not rate highly for every criteria and indicator. For example, indirect methods, such as surveys, provide little opportunity for participants to learn more about an issue. But they are often cost-efficient, anonymous, and more representative of the broad public. Conversely, direct methods such as workshops and round tables provide great opportunities for learning, for establishing dialogue between individuals with diverse values, and for identifying workable solutions. A participatory process should not be thought of as a single event or application of a single tool but as a long-term process integrating a series of appropriate tools.

3 Conclusion

The paper provided an overview of the knowledge, tools, and skills to better implement participatory processes. It is aimed at addressing the needs of policy and decision makers, managers, and scientists whose job requires them to engage the public in decisions they make. This may include university-based researchers, consultants, or government employees working in

Tab. 1: Core evaluation criteria & indicators of successful participation tools
(adapted from Beckley et al. 2005, p.21)

Core elements	Criteria and Indicators
Breadth	Representation – Incorporate a wide range of public values
	Accessibility – Be available to all public interests
	Renewal – Allow for new participants over time
	Anonymity – Protect participants’ identities when necessary
Depth	Listening & Dialogue – Foster a two-way flow of information
	Flexibility – Be flexible in scope
	Deliberation – Provide opportunities for frank and open discussion
	Transparency & Credibility – Promote and make available in a clearly understandable form, independent input from scientific and other value-based sources
	Relationship Building – Promote positive personal and institutional relationships
Outcomes	Relevance – Influence the decision-making process
	Effectiveness – Improve the quality of decisions
	Mutual learning – Contribute to all participants’ knowledge
	Reciprocity – Reward or provide incentives
	Cost-effectiveness – Output or outcome is cost-effective relative to inputs



operations or policy. The use of the tools introduced in this article could help move decision makers from talking about public participation and controlling dissent towards meaningfully incorporating public values into the planning and decision-making process.

“Doing” participation effectively is more of an art than a technical skill that can be taught. Many decision-makers and managers “do” participation every day, but many do not have the opportunity to reflect on their practice or to contemplate ways to do it better. This article was designed to offer this opportunity and to provide with useful knowledge and tools that could help these decision-makers and managers engage communities and the public to make sound management decisions.

References

- Ambus, L., and A. Krishnaswamy, A. (2009). Developing a curriculum on the basics of public participation. *Link 11*, 12-13. http://www.forrex.org/publications/link/ISS55/vol11_no1_art6.pdf
- Arnstein, S. (1969). A ladder of citizen participation. *JAIP* 35, 216-224.
- Auditor General of British Columbia (2008). Public participation: Principles and best practices for British Columbia. Report 11. Victoria, British Columbia. <http://www.bcauditor.com/pubs/2008>
- Beckley, T., Parkins, J., and Sheppard, S. (2005). *Public participation in sustainable forest management: A reference guide*. Edmonton, Alberta, Canada: Sustainable Forest Management Network.
- Crosby, B. (1992). *Stakeholder analysis: A vital tool for strategic managers*. Technical Notes, No.2. Washington, DC, USA: Implementing Policy Change Project for the US Agency for International Development.
- DSE – Department of Sustainability and Environment (2005a). *An introduction to engagement, Book 1: Effective engagement*. Government of Victoria, Australia. <http://www.dse.vic.gov.au/effective-engagement/resources/download-effective-engagement>
- DSE (2005b). *The engagement planning workbook, Book 2: Effective engagement*. Government of Victoria, Australia. <http://www.dse.vic.gov.au/effective-engagement/resources/download-effective-engagement>
- DSE (2005c). *Effective engagement toolkit, Book 3*. Government of Victoria, Australia. <http://www.dse.vic.gov.au/effective-engagement/resources/download-effective-engagement>
- Hislop, M. and Twery, M. (2001). *A decision framework for public involvement in forest design planning*. Roslin, Scotland: Final Report prepared for Policy and Practice Division of the Forestry Commission.
- IAP2 – International Association of Public Participation (2007a). . Spectrum of participation. www.iap2.org/associations/4748/files/spectrum.pdf
- IAP2 (2007b).. Core values. <http://www.iap2.org/associations/4748/files/CoreValues.pdf>
- IAP2 (2010).. Code of ethics. <http://www.iap2.org/associations/4748/files/CodeofEthics.pdf> (accessed 11.2010).
- Means, K., Josayma, C., Nielsen, E., and Viriyasakultorn, V. (2002). *Community-based resource management conflict: A training package*. Volume 2. Bangkok, Thailand: FAO/RECOFTC.

Acknowledgments

This paper is based on a curriculum on “participation basics” developed by FORREX in 2009 with funding from the Forest Investment Account-Forest Science Program (Ambus and Krishnaswamy, 2009). An earlier version of this paper was submitted to the BC Journal of Ecosystems and Management published by FORREX and is under review at the time of submitting this paper.

Correspondence to

Ajit Krishnaswamy, PhD
 FORREX Forum for Research and Extension
 in Natural Resources
 c/o School of Resource and Environmental Management
 Simon Fraser University
 Burnaby, BC V5A 1S6
 Canada
 Phone: +1 778 782 8080
 e-mail: ajit.krishnaswamy@forrex.org
www.forrex.org