

Project Visions and Visioning



This article is developed within the scope of the **Project Visions and Visioning**, an effort to enhance Foresight learning through collaborative work.

As an institutional activity, **participation** is the key element of foresight. Foresight activities have the following main characteristics: systematic, participatory, action oriented, and considering alternative futures. Participation in foresight has two relevant aspects: participation to the foresight process (as a participatory process), and participation to actions (mobilizing for joint actions). This indicates that the active involvement of the various stakeholders, so-termed stakeholder engagement, from initiation to implementation and throughout all the stages of the activity, is a necessity for success. ^[1]

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What does it mean *participation in foresight*?

Collective decision making which deals with future through participation is a key characteristic of foresight, which distinguishes it from other future oriented activities. Participation has been mentioned widely in the management literature. Participation aims at greater inclusiveness of social actors, e.g. experts, stakeholders and citizens. Participatory approaches create dialogue among stakeholders, producing dynamics towards understanding each other's roles and responsibilities. According to Currie-Alder (2003)^[2], in adopting a participatory approach there is the expectation that:

different stakeholders will share and be enriched by that sharing. Depending on the activity being shared and the purpose of participation, stakeholders can be expected to share their perspectives, interests, values, information, knowledge... Through sharing, the interaction of stakeholders is expected to achieve some synergy whereby the outcome or results is greater than the sum of the

individual elements being shared.

Stakeholder participation

The main participants of foresight exercises are stakeholders from relevant areas of concern. Stakeholder participation has become an important factor in areas such as policy analysis, integrated environmental assessment, technology assessment and foresight. According to Van de Kerkhof (2001), stakeholders are *individuals or groups that are or perceive themselves as being affected by or interested in the decision-making on a certain issue*^[3].

Currie-Alder (2003) sees the purpose of participation as a means to enrich decisions through greater understanding, legitimacy or capacity. In terms of understanding the participatory approaches can be used to cope with complexity and share understanding among stakeholders. Regarding legitimacy, participatory approaches seek to make a process more relevant to interested stakeholders of the process and its outputs. In terms of capacity, participatory approaches also seek to improve the skills, knowledge and experience of those involved in the management process through formal and informal learning^[4].

Levels of participation

From Arnstein's ladder of citizen participation, as presented in Saritas (2003), we can have this *spectrum of participation*.

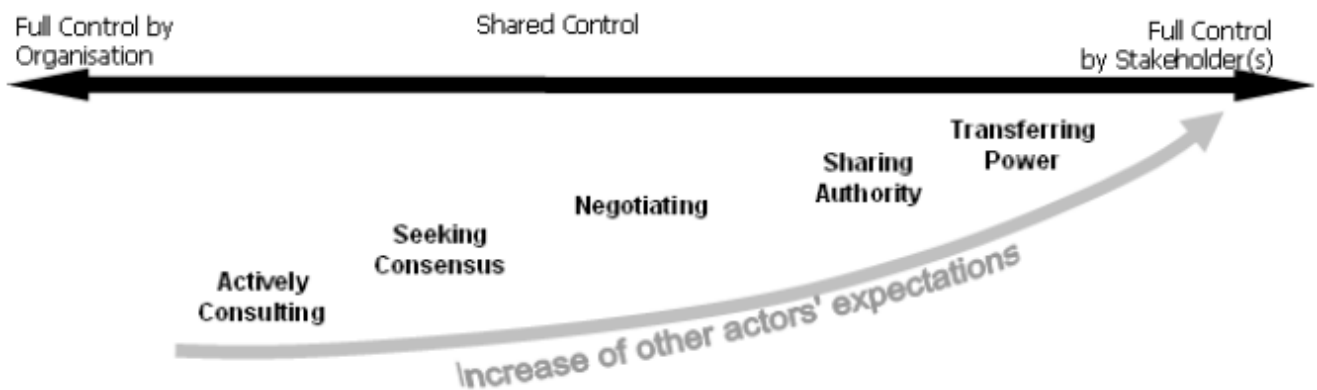


Figure 1: Spectrum of participation

At one extreme of the spectrum, the control is held by a single powerful stakeholder and at the other extreme this control is fully dispersed among stakeholders. Participatory approaches are presented between these two extremes and describe a number of situations in which other stakeholders participate by informing, influencing or performing.

Modes of participation

Participation may occur formally or informally. Formal participation refers to legally delegated opportunities for stakeholders to participate in the decision-making. This form of participation is normally present in governments or trade union-initiatives. In contrast, participatory approaches can create informal situations where other stakeholders fulfill responsibilities for performing tasks. Once these stakeholders enter into the management process, they can feel empowered to have a greater role and learn to take on new responsibilities; thus some

participation can create positive feedback and inspire more participation. Since participation may occur informally, an apparently weak form of participation may be stronger than expected. According to Miles and Keenan (2002)^[5]

foresight requires the participation of players in guiding the participants from the identification of the general and specific objectives, through the planning of the activities to be completed and the methodologies to be adopted, to the management of operations and the dissemination of results.

Participation in Foresight

One of the main features of any foresight activity is its participatory dimension, the active and highly valued involvement of the various participants throughout all the stages of the exercise. This participation should not be occasional and sporadic, but must be considered a determining factor in the final result. This can require the participation of stakeholders in steering the exercise from the identification of the general and specific objectives, through the planning of the activities to be completed and the methodologies to be adopted, to the management of operations and the dissemination of results.

Social learning occurs as stakeholders learn through interaction with other participants in a foresight exercise, changing their views on the issue(s) under examination. This can lead to conflict resolution, to the change of behaviors and the perceptions. Thus, social learning may have an impact beyond the substance of the exercise. Social learning may occur at two levels: first it can lead to cognitive changes (first-order learning), but it also changes values and core beliefs of stakeholders (second-order learning).

Dilemmas of participation in foresight

Ruud van der Helm, an independent futurist based in the Hague, in Netherlands, has pointed out that there are ten main insolvable dilemmas regarding participation in foresight exercises^[6].

Participation as the answer and as the problem

Choosing foresight means acknowledging the importance of actor-networks and participation. The justification of this choice can either be conceptual (there are theoretical reasons for involving the actors/actor network), ideological (it is important/desirable to involve them) or instrumental (for the objectives we have, the involvement of the actor-network is required). The conceptual, ideological and the instrumental levels are not very well distinguished in literature on participation. This may be caused by the all-comprising nature of participation (if participation is good, then it is good for everything). And although everybody agrees on the idea that participation is not the panacea, participation and actor-network literature often treat it as such. Participation is obviously not an end in itself (it literally means that we participate in something), but a method that either supports current practices (for example in decision making) or replaces them.

The involvement of the actors

The central theme of all foresights is not "*what are we discussing with whom*" but "*with whom are we discussing what*". The latter question should not be confused with "*who are discussing*", because it is critical to emphasize that the discussion will always be larger than the network practically involved. Furthermore, although

foresight has obviously been inspired by ideas of public space politics and free speech philosophy, participation remains related to an initiator and to an organizer, this being inherent to the pillar of organization. Power relations and strategic behavior are therefore at the core of any foresight. Although everybody is dependent on everybody (in an ideal network), it would be naive to think that for that reason actors will abandon strategic behavior or short-term advantages. In order to avoid this dilemma many open approaches focus on <i>"the relevant stakeholders" or "everybody".

The level of ambition

The third dilemma of participation is the level of ambition of the initiators, the context and the participants. The ambition of proponents of participation is usually high (participation is needed for better solutions, better implementation, more democratic procedures, etc.). Again this may be seen as a type of overshooting to reach at least something in the direction of these large ambitions, but could also be considered wishful thinking.

Representation and legitimization

Participation works best in a situation where it is not needed, i.e. in an environment in which all interests are taken into consideration. Paradoxically, the rise of participation can only be explained by the fact that this latter condition is not met. The demand for participation has grown, because people felt that their interests were not sufficiently heard (participation claim), or because practitioners in the field realized that development programs failed due to the lack of appropriation by the local population (participation failure). The participation claim is related to the idea of representation (not being represented), whereas the participation failure is mainly related to the frustration of development policies (especially in developing countries) to solve the imminent needs, like water supply, hygiene or infrastructure with outside intervention.

Knowledge, power and strategic behavior

The ancient dilemma between knowledge and power is still among us, and it would be unduly dismissed as passé (contemporary concepts like "*the brain-drain*", "*knowledge management*" or "*intellectual property*" all point in the direction that knowledge and power still have to be addressed simultaneously). Participation is (partially) about knowledge, but, as participation practitioners emphasize, there are different types of knowledge.

Formalism or freedom

An interesting paradox in participation is that most participatory exercises are extremely contingent and vulnerable for influences that can hardly be organized, whereas most literature on participation and foresighting is dealing with the design of robust methods that could apply in different settings. There is a discrepancy between the idea of the toolkit and the nature of deliberation. In other words: there is a dilemma between formalism and freedom. Whereas freedom can hardly be organized (open space facilitation method would defy this thesis), most attention is paid to how to formalize participation. This may also have a practical cause: it is difficult to sell freedom, but you can sell formalized products. Formalization occurs at different levels: tool design, method design, process design, contextual settings. Each of them can be organized from extremely formal to relatively free. Tools, in the first place, are likely to be rather formal.

Entering the debate: between timing and perseverance

Mobilizing a network of actors within the setting of a foresight exercise raises other questions, like timing and timeliness. Participation is considered to be necessary as early in the process as possible. This is a very neat conception, but of course it ignores an important aspect of participation: it deals with long-lasting projects in which timing, timeliness and perseverance become strategic characteristics beyond a fundamental necessity. In this respect foresight does have an advantage, since the rather elevated level of abstraction (inherent to anticipation) forces the organizers to build some kind of a momentum, which is translated in a rather short production time. But timing remains crucial for two reasons: the first is organizational (the time to gather people and the budget to get the train running, the delays related to communication), the second is strategic.

Going beyond information: communication and mediation

Above all, participatory activities are acts of communication and mediation. Communication is about language, mediation about channeling language towards mutual understanding. At a first look, we could argue that we are not dealing with a dilemma, but with an almost factual observation. But none of the other dilemmas may be so difficult as this particular one, perhaps because it relates to the fundamental characteristic of human relations as such.

Results and non-results

Beyond the question of how to communicate there is the issue of what is there to communicate. Some theoreticians argue that this latter question is of lesser importance. The result of a participatory exercise is that the network of actors reorganizes itself in order to become more effective in solving its problems. The communication and the organization are nothing else than the results, which will also guarantee a relevant (or just, or legitimate) output.

Appreciating and apprehending success and failure

Related to the former dilemma on results and non-results, it is fair to understand whether participation has been a success. The key problem to this type of evaluation is of course, success in terms of what? The dilemma of (the impossibility of) evaluation of this type of exercises has been abundantly discussed, for example in policy analysis literature. The one-off nature of many of the participatory exercises (and foresights) makes benchmarking and comparative analysis difficult. In general, proponents of participation will insist on the potentially beneficial effects of ideal participation (like mutual learning, better decisions, wider support for decisions and will minimize the so-called pitfalls like strategic use of (the outcomes of) the process.

References

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