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# *Public Participation in Policy Processes: Towards a Research Agenda*

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## **Introduction**

Given the enormous amount of books, articles, theoretical reflections and empirical research, one might expect that we know much, if not everything about public participation in public policy processes. However, as will be argued below, this is far beside the truth. Although the field is very innovative, the dominant discourse is still confounded with myths, dubious presuppositions and false notions which are more closely related to positions and personal opinions about the desirability of public participation than to a realistic view upon the subject. This paper intends to give an overview of such notions and depicts where more research in order to increase our knowledge is needed.

Such research is needed, because supposed drawbacks of interactive policymaking can also be as convincingly argued. Those arguments argue, for instance, that in order to arrive at qualitatively sound policies it is necessary to be able to think them over, to have time to consider the pros and cons of different alternatives and to reflect on the policy-making process. One boundary condition with which to ensure this is that policy-makers can work relatively undisturbed, in order to ensure that a coherent policy is made, and that the policy as a whole is efficient and effective. This requires thinking policy proposals through instead of talking them over. In other words, a certain distance between policy-makers and their environment is necessary. Many policies fail, not because they lack support, but because they have not been thought through.

Weber (1958:255) suggested that an administration that negotiates too much will eventually fall victim to those groups in society that already have a greater than average influence, namely industry and financial institutions. He pointed out that it is a fairy tale to believe that the public administration could steer, for instance, economic developments by negotiation; instead, in such situations, he expected economic partners to enhance their influence on public policies (Page, 1992:92).

Lowi (1969), Freeman (1955) and Hecló (1978) expected the existence and cultivation of such networks to result in more iron rings surrounding the administration. This would imply that innovative tendencies become unlikely. Everyone tries to influence the direction of 'new' developments, as a result of which the administration gets caught in a web of players. Beer (1982) also mentions problems arising from the large influence of stakeholders, namely delay, postponement, immobility and, in general, pluralistic stagnation.

This paper suggests to go back to the basics of social processes, namely the 'why', the 'who', the 'what', the 'how' and the 'when' of public participation. On all these aspects of public participation much is written and argued. But much less is tested against reality. Just to give some examples: Every time one discusses the merits of public participation, the question arises whether it is worthwhile. Does it not delay the process too much? The classic answer is, that it delays at the beginning of the process, but that one wins this lost time back in the implementation phase of the policy, because the legitimacy of the policy increases when one involves people. This is of course a sound argumentation. The unanswered question is, however, whether the argument holds in practice. Another example concerns who to involve. We still often treat the public as being one coherent whole, only distinguished by different interests. However, it might be the case that in practice it might be sensible to involve different societal groups, different individuals in varying policy areas in different ways. But research that tells us how and when is absent or at least incomplete. The last example

concerns the effects of public participation. We assume that such empowerment makes for better policies, more legitimacy and a balance between different interests. However, the question is again whether such notions hold when tested against reality.

This paper does not intend to be exhaustive. It neither suggests that it covers all research. It does not even provide new approaches since it is mainly based on previous research of and lectures given by the author. How could it be a complete overview given the magnitude of research done through the years? This paper intends to provide a research agenda regarding the who, when, why, and how of public participation and will emphasize that perhaps the content of such processes might be as important as the design thereof.

### **1. Why Involve the Public?**

There may be lots of reasons for involving the public in public policy processes. The ten most important or at least most often quoted reasons are given below.

1. First of all, it has everything to do with democracy (Linder, 1994). Policies which have an effect on groups in society have to be supported by these groups. Seeking the support of societal groups enhances public participation. Citizens are not only customers receiving products from a service delivery agency but also, and perhaps principally, active participants who have to be able to influence those decisions by which their own situation or that of others is significantly affected. It belongs to basic democratic rights that citizens can indirectly and directly influence, participate in and co-produce policy-making processes.
2. Second, it has to do with the stability of the political system. Support for the political system is next to the demands placed on it one of the most important inputs, which determines in the short or long run the viability of the political system (see Easton, 1965, but also other system theorists). When support is lacking it may be expected that societal problems increase, the trust in the political system decreases and demands placed upon the system increase. Such developments can evolve just so far. After such a critical point, however, the system is likely to collapse (see, for instance, the former East European countries and, more recently, Indonesia).
3. According to Terry (1995), public administrators need external as well as internal support. They have to maintain a favorable public image and should (internally) bind parochial group egotism to larger loyalties and aspirations (see also Selznick, 1957; Perrow, 1961; Pfeffer & Salancik, 1978). External support for policies results in a favorable public image which is crucial for success (Terry, 1995:146). Perrow pointed at the necessity of a predominantly favorable public image which, in his words, translates into 'prestige' which, in turn, increases the likelihood that administrative agencies will continue to secure vital resources from the external environment (Perrow, 1961:335; Terry, 1995:146). A lack of support or positive evaluations can also result in a lack of trust. Such support can be ensured by cultivating and maintaining supportive relationships among an alliance of individuals, groups and organizations — key constituents—who are willing to take action on behalf of the agency (Terry, 1995:155).
4. Policies tend to become better in a qualitative sense if they are co-produced by the policy-makers and the target groups. The variance of ideas implies that more information is gathered and taken into account before reaching a decision. The transparency of the policy is also enhanced and therefore its controllability and accountability. As such, public participation is a strong form of 'checks and balances'. It ensures that policies are better thought through, well argued and legitimate. This point is made especially in cybernetic theory in which the crucial function of feedback and learning is stressed (Beer, 1973); but

also in theories on policy-making in which learning behavior is crucial (Sabatier and Jenkins-Smith, 1993).

5. Policies tend to become more moderate (Lindblom, 1965). Particularly in public policy-making not only the costs and benefits as such but also the distribution of the benefits and costs over different groups in society is at stake. To seek support from all involved parties will result in a more reasonable distribution of the costs and benefits over advantaged and disadvantaged groups in society. Lindblom (1965) calls this the 'potential intelligence of democracy'.
6. External support and 'co-production' prevents paternalism which is a serious danger when policies are developed over the heads of the people involved. Complaints by citizens that the policy did not work, that public policies fail as usual and that they get the feeling that they are being ignored, all make policies which aim to change the behavior of citizens less effective. People are more susceptible to recommendations when they have been involved in the process which resulted in the recommendations than when the recommendation has been dictated to them.
7. Trying to obtain external support does not slow down the policy-making process as is often thought but may well reduce the time necessary to progress from identifying a policy problem, to developing a policy, making a decision about it and implementing the policy. Complex decision-making processes may well be speeded up if stakeholders are continuously involved at each step (Dukes, 1996; Susskind and Field, 1996). The alternative of neglecting public support at the beginning of the policy process often results in resistance and delays in later stages of the process.
8. Public support and public participation can result in a decrease in the ambiguity policy-makers might face. As March and Feldman argued, policy problems and solutions often suffer from ambiguity about the concepts. The main problem is often not the lack of information but the differing interpretations and valuations of this information. Because problems and solutions are often not defined clearly the policy-making process is mainly a process of issue interpretation (Feldman, 1988). This is, first and foremost, a social process in which compromise and negotiation are crucial; it is not primarily an intellectual process.
9. Support for policies increases support for the policy-makers themselves. The elected ones, in particular, gain in the probability of being re-elected. It is clear that when the policies they have proposed, enacted and implemented are judged favorably by the public in general, the public will be more inclined to re-elect them.
10. Last but not least, public participation may have an intended side-effect on the knowledge of participants. Their knowledge and awareness about the issues under consideration may increase; it may reduce the risk of violent confrontation and may make it clear which options are considered (Dukes, 1996:64).

### *1.1 The Consequences for Research*

However, the advantages mentioned are still merely suppositions. We expect public participation to have these effects, but don't know for sure. This makes it difficult to argue convincingly that interactive policy making is something to be desired. This indicates that further theoretical explorations are not of prime importance, because there exist an abundant literature with theories about the impacts of public participation.

**Needed is theory driven empirical research into the question of the actual occurrence of the expected impacts in interactive policy making processes.**

This is not only needed for scientific reasons aimed at understanding the factors influencing the effectiveness and efficiency of interactive policymaking, but also for practical reasons, namely to increase public participation where this is likely to be fruitful and to not to stimulate and initiate such processes where it is likely that opposite effects will occur and participants become frustrated because of the probable ineffectiveness and inefficiency of such programs.

## **2. Who to Involve?**

Sometimes it is assumed that public participation is about involving the public in policy processes. If only it was that simple. The public as such does not exist. There are profit organizations, i.e. business and chambers of commerce, not for profit organizations, such as neighborhood groups, the media, religious organizations, and political party groups; there are groups within the public sector, such as public officials and elected politicians; and perhaps there is something like the public in general. The question arising is who should be involved in policy making processes and who is in reality involved in public policymaking processes. Previous research indicated – but not more than that – that there are large differences between groups regarding the likelihood that they are asked to and do participate at the local level.

It showed that the extent to which these societal groups are brought into the policy making process by local policy makers varies significantly among different nations (De Vries, 2002). First of all there is a difference between old, newer and newest democracies. In the previously communist East European countries there is in the middle of the 1990s still much less interactive policy making compared to especially Western European countries. This shows that socio-cultural, socio-economic and political-historical factors might play an important role in the explanation of interactive policy processes. Nevertheless, such macro factors cannot explain by themselves why at the local level policy makers are more or less inclined to seek the support of societal groups. This paper sought the intermediary factor between macro factors and the actual inclination of local policy makers to seek support or not, in their attitudes, values and norms.

The analysis also showed that the attitudes needed to increase the probability of interactive policy making, vary with the societal groups involved (De Vries, 2002). Trust is a major variable for seeking support of the public in general, of neighborhood groups, local leaders of political parties and religious leaders. It does not play a significant role, however, in explaining the support sought of business and the media.

The possibilities of societal groups to influence policies outside the policy making process, by referenda, meetings, political movements, political parties, media and personal contacts also seems to be related to the inclination of policy makers to seek the support of societal groups such as the general public, neighborhood groups, local leaders of political parties and religious leaders. This points at the impact of the power base of societal groups to get their interests taken into account even without being incorporated in the policy making process, on the inclination of policy makers to seek their support beforehand.

A technocratic and consensus seeking attitude is favorable for seeking the support of business, but detrimental for seeking the support for the other groups. The support of the public, and leaders of political parties is especially sought when in a country technocratic attitudes are absent among local policy makers.

### **2.1 Consequences for Research**

The outcomes of that previous research suggested that it indeed makes a difference whether one talks about public participation, involvement of business leaders, neighborhood groups, media, or leaders of political parties.

However, such research is at best indicative and not at all conclusive. Many questions remain as to the who is involved and why these actors are included and others excluded.

**More research is needed into the explaining factors behind the actual inclusion and exclusion of various stakeholders in interactive policy making.**

Which actors are involved in policy making processes and what are the explaining factors behind that, are basic questions of which the answer is still uncertain.

### **3. How to Involve?**

Until 15 years ago, the variation in designs for public participation in policymaking processes was minimal. The usual form was a hearing. Policy-makers put forward a proposal and the decision-makers' preferences are already known. Participation rounds are then organized in which all stakeholders can give their comments. Of course, some do make their points. Nonetheless, the fact is that there was no debate about the issue in such participation rounds. A committee of civil servants presides over the meeting and notes the points that people raise. After everyone had his say, the meeting was closed. Many members of the public found this very depressing. You can have your say, but nobody seems to react, and worse, nothing seems to change. Since then the number of experiments with alternative designs of public participation rapidly increased. In the Netherlands many municipalities initiated city-talks, local forums and platforms, think tanks, quality panels, citizen advice circles, and political markets, or council meetings outside city hall, "meetings on location", but also in some municipalities the right was given to citizens to put themes on the agenda of the council (Korsten, 1979; Pröpper & Steenbeek 1998; Thomassen, 1991; Veldboer, 1996; Van Deth et al, 1994).

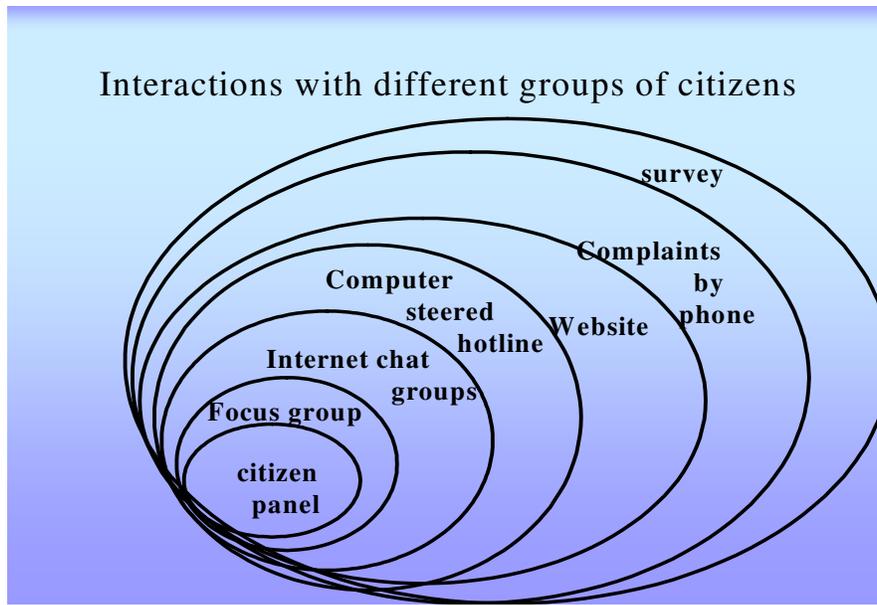
Broader information from citizens can be obtained by means of surveys, forums, citizen juries, community polls, round table talks, workshops, and starting meetings.

Other municipalities changed the format of citizen participation in order to attract a larger public into theatre plays, shows, cabaret and other playful settings. One also experimented with the new possibilities provided by ICT especially to attract young people (Jansen, 2002). This ranges from opening municipal websites, sometimes with the possibilities for interaction, chat-sessions by councillors and aldermen, internet panels, to experiments using msn or even SMS and digital debates.

Furthermore, one experimented with giving citizens their own budget to solve neighbourhood problems. The number of local experiments is nearly infinite and many different formats were tried. In the second half of the 1990s one started with experiments in co-production.

It seemed that every municipality initiated at least once a year an experiment which was innovative and playful. Many of these experiments got positive evaluations in the sense that the organizers were satisfied with the idea, the implementation thereof and the results in terms of the originality of the ideas that came about.

The assumption underlying this development is that the question 'who' is involved in local policy making processes is expected to be dependent on the question 'how' one designs such processes. It still is one of the major questions how to enable large groups of societal actors to have their say. The sheer number of potential participants makes policymakers wonder how to manage and design such processes (see figure 1).



**Figure 1. Interactions with different groups of citizens**

One possibility for such a design I encountered at an ASPA conference in Phoenix Arizona a couple of years ago. It presented a design of interactive policymaking in which everyone in the community is involved in its own way, given the impossibility of talking face-to-face with everybody. That model is given above. It suggests different designs for different target groups. Those directly involved can be invited and their opinions heard in focus groups and face-to-face interactions, while the views of the population at large can be obtained through surveys with all types of designs in between for different target groups and different purposes.

### ***3.1 Consequences for Research***

It would be interesting to see if this or a comparable model could work in general. Recent research noted that it can even have opposite effects to use surveys. The same might be the case for the other instruments mentioned. Hence, research into the effects of these instruments to involve different societal groups in different ways is needed. Do the presumed effects occur also when such designs are used and would it be sensible to use this design more often, or is it just one of those solutions that work somewhere but not everywhere? This results in the third research question crucial for the understanding of public participation.

**Research is not so much needed into the design of new and innovative ways of public participation, but more into the varying impact of existing designs thereof with regard to all those effects that are theoretically expected from interactive policymaking processes.**

## **4. Varying Purposes of Public Involvement**

The who, how and why depend on the question how one regards different participants. Second it depends on interaction designs able to involve different actors.

As to the first point, two dimensions can be distinguished, based on variables central in political theories and research, namely power and interests, that is, the congruence/ antagonism of interests between policy makers and societal groups, and the extent to which the relations are

hierarchical. This results in four forms of interactive policy making. Of course this is an ideal-type distinction. In practice all kinds of mixed forms might be visible.

**Four Types of Interaction between Government and Societal Groups**

**Table 1**

|                            |                   | <b>(dis)parity of power and authority</b>  |   |
|----------------------------|-------------------|--|---|
|                            |                   | <i>Hierarchical</i>  | <i>Horizontal</i>   |
| <b>Perceived Interests</b> | <i>Antagonism</i> | Societal groups as target groups<br><b>A</b><br>Government steers hierarchically | Societal groups as interest groups<br><b>B</b><br>Resolution of conflicting interests |
|                            | <i>Congruence</i> | Societal groups as clients<br><b>C</b><br>Government provides services           | Societal groups as partners<br><b>D</b><br>Government becomes governance              |

The first design, A, treats societal groups as target groups. The policy makers are dominant and fear that without their interference the population might act in undesirable ways. The policies are intended to make undesirable behaviour less likely and desirable behaviour more likely. In this way order and stability is maintained and societal problems can be resolved. It is because of the basic assumption that people might show unwanted behaviour that a presumed antagonism between policy makers and population forms the point of departure in the policy making process. Given the powers invested in the politicians and the bureaucratic policy makers, the participation of societal groups is minimal. Policies are directed toward steering the behaviour of the latter and not at getting consensus, which is hard to expect anyway if people have different interests.

Type B still departs from antagonism in interests, but the relations between policy makers and societal groups are less hierarchical. The latter try to influence the policy making process, and are involved in such processes because it is recognised that policy outcomes may be profitable for some groups while being harmful to others. Hence, the dominant view is that one has to deliberate and allow for participation by different societal groups before decisions are made in order to mitigate the possibly disadvantageous impacts. In fact this type of interactive policy making involves different policies. It is not about the crook having a say in his own conviction, but its about the ‘citoyen’ having a say in policies which might be good for economic development but not for the environment and vice versa.

Type C assumes that the interests between policy makers and societal groups are congruent. People as well as policy makers want quick, effective, efficient and well thought-out service delivery by the public sector. We all want our passports and drivers licence as well as our permits to be delivered the same day we ask for them. In this case, it is about government as a service provider in which people in all their different roles are the clients. Underlying this model is a hierarchical relation, based on the relation between on the one side the service provider, in public services often a monopolist, and on the other hand the client being simultaneously voter and customer, but in this model seen first and foremost as the client. A customer who might not be satisfied with the service delivery, in which case it is in the interest of the service provider and client that the service delivery is to be improved and opportunities are created to utter complaints. One may notice that the type of policies concerned are again very different.

Finally, type D is characterised by congruence of interests and equivalency in the mutual relations. It is what nowadays is depicted ‘governance’, referring to all organisations and institutions that are involved in the structuring of society, including governmental as well as non-governmental

actors and independent agencies, without anyone being dominant (Raadschelders, 2003: 4), and central in modern day analyses of policy networks.

#### ***4.1 Consequences for Research***

Important in this respect is to investigate to which degree nation-states have provided the institutional preconditions to make such interaction feasible. What kind of procedural, informative, consultative, and institutional measures are taken in different countries, and what does this tell us about the kind of interaction between citizens and governmental agencies?

Every type of interaction might need its own procedures and institutions and one can investigate whether such institutions exist in a country, which procedures are dominant at a certain moment and whether this influences the dominant design of interactive policymaking, which does seem to be the case in, for instance, the Netherlands (cf. De Vries, 2005b).

The above results in the following research subject which needs investigation:

**Needed is research into the question to which degree the requirements for interactive policy making processes are fulfilled in different countries of the EU and to which degree the procedural, informational, institutional and restructuring measures taken show a bias toward a specific purpose of interaction processes?**

#### **5. When to Involve People?**

The last question to be addressed in this paper is the old question when to involve people in the policy process. Artificially one can divide the policy process in different phases, for instance, agenda setting, diagnosis, policy development, decision making, implementation and evaluation. Although such a division is nowadays hardly standard anymore, it serves a purpose in asking questions when public involvement is the most effective and efficient. Should societal groups be involved at the end of the process, or as seems to be the case more and more nowadays, should they be involved in the first phases, or should they be involved all through the policy process?

The dominant opinion seems to be that it is better to involve people as early in the process as possible. The time invested in interaction at that phase is regained at later phases. However, there are also serious disadvantages of an interaction process that starts off too early. Problems are perhaps not even defined, the dimensions not well understood, policy options not even considered, the means available not yet known, let alone the preference of policy instruments to be used. Such a situation of complexity and ambiguity has all the potential of becoming a frustrating process. However, the same remarks can be made when the involvement is concentrated at the middle or the end of the process.

#### ***5.1 Consequences for Research***

The uncertainty surrounding the phasing of interaction in public policy processes urges for research that investigates the effects of the timing of such interaction.

**More research would be welcomed to investigate whether there is an optimal point within the policy making process to begin public involvement, which factors are determinative in this respect and whether this varies over policy areas and countries.**

#### **Conclusion**

The point of departure in this paper was that the field of public participation is very innovative and many changes are visible in the last decades. However, comparative research in the effects of public participation is still inconclusive. This paper posed five questions that are in need of thorough investigation.

1. Needed is theory driven empirical research into the question of the actual occurrence of the expected impacts in interactive policy making processes.
2. More research is needed into the explaining factors behind the actual inclusion and exclusion of various stakeholders in interactive policy making
3. Research is not so much needed into the design of new and innovative ways of public participation, but more into the varying impact of existing designs thereof with regard to all those effects that are theoretically expected from interactive policymaking processes.
4. Needed is research into the question to which degree the requirements for interactive policy making processes are fulfilled in different countries of the EU and to which degree the procedural, informational, institutional and restructuring measures taken show a bias toward a specific purpose of interaction processes?
5. More research would be welcomed to investigate whether there is an optimal point within the policy making process to begin public involvement, which factors are determinative in this respect and whether this varies over policy areas and countries.

Well now, the old Zen saying is that one fool can ask more questions than ten wise men can answer. Perhaps this paper does just that, posing fools questions. But I believe more in the old Chinese proverb that one who asks a question is a fool for five minutes; one who does not ask questions remains a fool forever. If we take public participation serious, we should investigate the old questions Harold D. Lasswell asked, namely "Who Gets What When and How?" and investigate if the authoritative allocation of goods and services, he implicitly refers to, alters if we find right answers to the question "Who is involved in What When and How? Because that is what is at stake when we talk about public participation, involvement, empowerment, deliberation or whatever novel term is used for peoples' influence on public policy processes. Do public policies become better and does the distribution and redistribution of goods become more just and balanced?

This paper proposes a direction for future research into these processes. It also proposed that we do not start from scratch, but take the numerous theories on the subject serious and try to find out what works for who, when and how.

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