

The challenge of public participation

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Abstract

Public Participation (PP) has gained widespread recognition as a key water management principle. Despite this, the practical application of PP remains problematic. This article presents the current state of developments in PP theory and practice. It discusses the benefits of PP and gives many suggestions for making PP more effective. It pays special attention to the place of PP in democratic theory, to the cultural context of PP, and to its application in international river basins. This article concludes that PP should not be regarded simply as an accessory in aiding water management. Effective PP is, in fact, an entirely different mode of governance.

Keywords: Culture; Democracy; Governance; International River basins; Public participation; Techniques

1. Introduction

There is no shortage of international declarations referring to Public Participation (PP) as a key water management principle. Perhaps the best known are the Dublin Statement (1992) and the Hague Declaration (2000). According to the second principle of the Dublin Statement, “water development and management should be based on a participatory approach, involving users, planners and policy-makers at all levels.” (ACC/ISGWR, 1992) The Hague Declaration lists seven challenges for achieving water security. The final challenge is that of “Governing water wisely: to ensure good governance, so that the involvement of the public and the interests of all stakeholders are included in the management of water resources.” The first challenge, “Meeting basic needs”, refers explicitly to the need to “empower people, especially women, through a participatory process of water management.” In addition, many international conventions and regulations contain specific PP requirements, such as the UN-ECE Convention on Access to Information, Public Participation in Decision-making and Access to Justice in Environmental Matters (Aarhus Convention) and the EU Water Framework Directive (2000/60/EC) (Ebbesson, 1998; REC, 1999; Kakebeeke & Bouman, 2000; UN-ECE, 2000).

Despite this official recognition, there is no consensus on the practical meaning of PP. While some see PP as a means of empowering people and enhancing democracy, others see PP mainly as a

marketing tool for government policy. Still others are simply against PP. Not surprisingly, the PP requirements of many international declarations and conventions are not implemented (e.g. REC, 1998).

This article presents the current state of developments in PP theory and practice. Section 2 discusses the potential benefits and problems associated with PP. Section 3 presents the different levels of PP and gives an overview of the different PP methods. Sections 4 and 5 discuss the role of PP in different democratic theories and the importance of the cultural context. Section 6 assesses the practical aspects of organising participatory processes, such as the identification of the different publics¹, the timing of PP and project management. Section 7 discusses the challenges of PP in large international river basins. The article closes with a short conclusion.

1.2. A working definition

In this article Public Participation is defined as *direct participation by non-governmental actors* in decision-making. “Direct participation” includes many different activities: the opportunity to send written comments, referenda, water users’ associations, mass demonstrations, legal action, etc. This article will focus on government-organised PP. “Non-governmental actors” includes individual citizens, individual companies, public interest groups and economic interest groups. This specifically includes women. They are often overlooked, but in many countries they are responsible for essential activities, such as fetching drinking water and growing food for household consumption² (IIAV, 2000; Académie de l’Eau *et al.*, 2000).

2. Why organise Public Participation?

2.1. Potential benefits

PP may be organised for several reasons (e.g. Delli Priscolli, 1978b; Roberts, 1995; Webler & Renn, 1995; Woerkom, 1997; Table 1). Firstly, it can result in better-informed and more creative decision-making. Important information may become available, for example, with regard to local conditions. New perspectives could be opened and new solutions could be developed (e.g. Scheer, 1996). Furthermore, PP helps to ensure that all relevant interests are heard.

¹ The term “publics” is used rather than the term “concerned public” from, for instance, the Aarhus Convention in order to emphasise that the public is not homogenous but consists of different groups with different views and interests.

² Some authors use “public involvement” as an umbrella term, covering both “public consultation” and “public participation.” (e.g. Roberts, 1995) Other authors distinguish between “public participation” and “stakeholder participation”. “Public” in this case refers to individual citizens and (small) public interest groups and “stakeholder” to the organised interests affected by or required to implement government decisions, including companies, economic interest groups and other government bodies (REC, 1999; World Bank, 1996).

In some cases, three “pillars” of PP are referred to: access to information, public participation in decision-making and access to justice (e.g. REC, 1998, 1999). These terms reflect a legal-administrative approach to PP. In this approach PP is seen as a set of public rights and a corresponding set of procedural obligations on the government. A legal-administrative approach may help to introduce PP if a government has strong reservations and may ensure that PP actually takes place in controversial cases. Despite this, it may be very difficult for the public to enforce its participatory rights. Detailed PP requirements may, in fact, result in increased levels of bureaucracy and may reduce flexibility. In practice, PP requirements may come to function as maximum requirements rather than minimum requirements (Delli Priscolli, 1978a).

Table 1. Potential benefits and potential problems of Public Participation

Potential benefits	Potential problems
Better-informed and more creative decision-making	Reluctant government that gives no serious follow-up, resulting in disappointment and <i>less</i> public acceptance of decisions
Greater acceptance of decisions, fewer implementation problems	Limited and unrepresentative response
Social learning of all involved	Low-quality response
More open and “integrated” government	Inconsistent decision-making
Enhanced democracy	Costs and time
Environmentally and economically sustainable water management	

Secondly, PP can result in greater public acceptance of decisions, fewer delays and more effective implementation. This is partly the result of better and more creative decisions. At least as important, however, is the opportunity for the public to have its say, even if this does not change the decision materially.

PP can also promote social learning, provided all parties – the different publics, government and experts – enter into a constructive dialogue. They can then learn how to manage collectively a complex natural resource such as a river basin and deal with conflicting views and interests. “Water awareness” may increase, stalemates may be overcome and real innovation can take place.

In addition, PP can promote more open and integrated government. In order to realise the benefits of PP the government must take the views of the public seriously and not be preoccupied with its own internal divisions and struggles (Langton, 2000; cf. Roberts, 1995). If these conditions are not met, PP will fail, but PP may in itself stimulate more open and outward-looking government.

Finally, PP may actually enhance democracy. Many see PP as a democratic right of the citizens and therefore a goal in itself. It may also instil more democratic attitudes in the participants (see section 4).

The overall effect of PP could be more sustainable water management in all senses: economic, environmental and social.

2.2. Potential problems

Realising the benefits of PP is not easy. Governments are often unwilling to listen to the public. A government may initiate PP only at a very late stage, when nothing can be changed, or it may simply ignore the results of PP. This will result in disappointment, soured public relations and less public acceptance rather than more.

Secondly, response from the public is often limited and unrepresentative. Usually, well-organised interest groups, well-educated white-collar workers and people living near the location of new projects are over-represented. Unorganised interests are often not represented at all. Members of this latter group may have little trust in government and may feel that their input will not be taken seriously. Moreover, they may have too little time for PP and too many other interests. They may not have the financial resources necessary for travelling to give their views, or for buying any relevant documentation. Finally, they may simply feel that it is the task of government to govern, not theirs.

Thirdly, the quality of the response may be low. Sometimes the public is seen as short-sighted, ill-informed, selfish and too emotional or lacking in democratic attitude (The same can often be said of

politicians and experts). The best remedy is a well-designed PP programme that provides the public with good information and stimulates social learning³ (cf. Pateman, 1970; Scheer, 1996).

In addition, PP could result in inconsistent decision-making. For instance, in one referendum the public could vote in favour of greater government expenditure, and in another, for lower taxes. The risk of inconsistent decision-making is lower in the case of (semi-)permanent PP platforms, such as standing consultative committees, and could be reduced even further by providing the public with good information and by stimulating social learning.

PP may also complicate negotiations between governments. Complete openness during negotiations may seriously reduce the potential for exploring possible solutions (Section 7).

Finally, PP could demand a great deal of time and money, especially if it is organised at an advanced stage. The extra time needed may be limited if PP is organised early in the process, when changes to the plans are still possible without causing delays. Costly implementation problems could thereby be avoided.

3. Levels and methods

Different levels of PP may be achieved. The lowest level is information supply. This does not constitute genuine participation. However, the public may also be allowed the opportunity to comment on plans, discuss issues and develop alternatives. The next level is shared decision-making. This means that the government shares decision-making powers with the public. For instance, water use sectors could be represented in water management bodies and corrective referenda could be held.

The highest level of PP is decision-making by the public itself. Here, the public assumes complete responsibility for some or all of the water management functions, along with financing, e.g. through water users' associations. Proponents of this level of PP argue that this would prevent over-exploitation of water resources and maximise social learning. It would also avoid the economically and environmentally harmful oversupply of infrastructure, and ensure proper maintenance and replacement. Water users' associations can be especially useful if the government is undemocratic or ineffective, or if it lacks the necessary finances. However, they are unlikely to be effective if they are imposed from above (cf. Pradhan, 1996). Moreover, all relevant water users should be represented and mechanisms should be put in place to address upstream–downstream conflicts and conflicts between different water use sectors (Ostrom, 1990; Dinesh Kumar, 2000).

Table 2 gives an overview of the different levels of PP and lists different methods that can be used. The various levels are based on Arnstein's "ladder of citizen participation" and subsequent variations (Arnstein, 1969; IAP2, 1969; Roberts, 1995; Creighton, 2000; Edelenbos, 2000). Arnstein focuses on power issues and emphasises that many forms of so-called "citizen participation" do not transfer any genuine power to the public. Table 2 also reflects other aspects of PP, such as social learning. More information on individual methods can be found in, for instance, Renn *et al.* (1995), World Bank (1996), Creighton (2000) and Borrini-Feyerabend *et al.* (2000).

³ "I know no safe depository of the ultimate powers of the society but the people themselves; and if we think them not enlightened enough to exercise their control with a wholesome discretion, the remedy is not to take it from them, but to inform their discretion by education." (Thomas Jefferson to William C. Jarvis, 1820 *The Writings of Thomas Jefferson, Memorial Edition*, Lipscomb and Bergh, eds, Washington, D.C., 1903–04, vol. 15, 278).

Table 2. Public Participation levels and relevant methods (not exhaustive).

Level of participation	Possible PP methods
1. Information The public gets/has access to information (not genuine PP, but the basis for all forms of it)	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Leaflets and brochures 2. Mailings 3. Use of the media: press releases, press conferences 4. Information centres 5. Repositories (other than 4, e.g. libraries and city halls) 6. (Travelling) exhibitions 7. Information hotlines/ contact persons 8. Open house 9. Field trips 10. Briefings (at meetings of residents' associations, women's clubs, etc.) 11. Internet 12. Cultural events (e.g. street theatre, especially for raising awareness)
2. Consultation The views of the public are sought	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 13. Reply forms 14. Opportunity to comment in writing 15. Public hearings and meetings 16. Interviews 17. Opinion polls 18. "Stakeholder analysis" 19. Gaming 20. Internet discussions 21. Advisory commissions/boards, focus groups 22. Non-binding referenda <p>Methods 4, 6, 7, 8, 9 and 10 could be used for consultation too.</p>
3. Discussion Real interaction takes place between the public and government	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 23. Small group meetings ("workshops", "charrettes", "coffee meetings", "round tables", "study circles", "brainstorm sessions", "planning cells", "citizen juries", etc.) 24. Large group meetings involving splitting up into smaller groups and/ or rotation between front benches and back benches or between subgroups (e.g. working groups, "Samoan circle", "open space meetings", carousel) <p>Methods 8, 9, 10, 19 and 21 can be used too.</p>
4. Co-designing The public takes an active part in developing policy or designing projects	Several of the meeting formats mentioned under 23 and 24.
5. Co-decision-making The public shares decision-making powers with government	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 25. Negotiations, e.g. resulting in a "voluntary agreement" 26. Public representation in governing bodies 27. Corrective referenda and all binding referenda initiated by government <p>Some of the meeting formats mentioned under 23 and 24 may also be used.</p>
6. Decision-making The public performs public tasks independently	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 28. Water users' associations and other NGOs performing public functions 29. Popular initiatives <p>Some of the meeting formats mentioned under 23 and 24.</p>

In order for the benefits of PP to be fully realised, a relatively high level of participation is needed. It remains, however, a matter for debate as to whether or not the public should actually get decision-making powers. This depends, firstly, on the issues at stake. Some issues demand significant government involvement, but others require much less, allowing the public to take a more prominent role. Moreover, the nature of the public and government in each situation is important. (Co-)decision-making powers are needed most where the government functions ineffectively or undemocratically. These powers can be implemented more easily if the public is well educated and interested in the issues at stake. Finally, democratic theory is an important factor.

4. Democratic theory and public participation

PP can be seen as a type of democracy. Democracy, though, comes in different forms and shapes. This section examines four theories and discusses the position of PP in each one (Table 3).

4.1. Parliamentary democracy

Perhaps the most popular theory of democracy is that of representative or parliamentary democracy. According to this theory, democracy means government by elected representatives. Government is in the hands of professional full-time politicians who are selected by and accountable to the public through regular elections. This would combine professionalism with popular control.

The theory of parliamentary democracy was developed in the 17th century, when government activities were still limited. Since the 19th century these activities have increased tremendously. This has resulted in the various government bureaucracies playing a far greater role than before. In addition, interest groups have become more influential. Parliamentary decision-making has largely been replaced

Table 3. Democratic theories and the role of PP.

Democratic theory	Role of PP
Parliamentary democracy Government by elected officials (In practice powers are shared with bureaucrats and powerful interest groups.)	Lower levels of PP: no (co-)decision-making powers for the public (In practice higher levels of PP may help to ensure that <i>all</i> interests share power.)
Direct democracy Direct participation of individual citizens in government	High levels of PP, e.g. referenda
Subsidiarity principle Government at the lowest possible level	High levels of PP, significant role for water users' organisations (Some interpretations of the subsidiarity principle may actually reduce PP.)
Pluralism Diversity of views and interests is key	Organised interests have a substantial, but informal role. Individuals are not expected to be very interested in participation.
Undemocratic theories No role for the public	No role of PP. (In practice PP can be organised for pragmatic reasons.)

by negotiations between (sectoral) government departments and agencies and between these bodies and powerful interest groups. Elected representatives are often only involved to formalise the decisions (e.g. Hijum, 1995; Hinssen, 1995; Mostert, 1997).

The role of PP in the theory of parliamentary democracy is limited. The public has a right to information and they may be consulted if it is felt that this might yield interesting information for government. However, the government remains ultimately responsible for decision-making.

The role of PP could be much more important in parliamentary systems as they currently exist. Elected representatives already share decision-making power with the different government bureaucracies and with powerful interest groups. The difference that well-organised PP could make is that it could allow powers to be shared with *all* relevant interests. It may break open closed policy networks and may improve transparency and accountability. However, PP may also become ineffectual, as powerful interest groups often prefer to do business with government directly, leaving the old networks to continue operating.

4.2. *Direct democracy*

The theory of direct democracy offers a quite different approach to democracy. Democracy in this theory is much more than regular elections. It implies the active, direct participation of individual citizens in government. Direct participation would give the public more control over public affairs and would counterbalance the power of government bureaucracies and sectoral interest groups. In addition, active citizens would take more interest in public affairs and develop more democratic attitudes (e.g. Pateman, 1970; Budge, 1996).

Supporters of direct democracy favour as much decision-making power for the public as possible. It has been proposed, for example, that parliamentary voting be replaced by voting through the Internet (Budge, 1996). Increased decentralisation is often suggested as a way to bring government closer to the people and facilitate direct participation. A well-known form of direct democracy, useable at different government levels, is the referendum.

4.3. *The subsidiarity principle*

Decision-making powers for the public also fit quite well into a third theory of democracy, called the “subsidiarity principle”. The subsidiarity principle emphasises the role of intermediary organisations between government and individual citizens. It views society as an organic whole of nested and juxtaposed systems. Examples of such systems are the educational system, industry and commerce, trade unions, agriculture and the environmental movement at the local, regional, national and international level. Government should recognise these different systems and should take responsibility only for those tasks that these systems cannot perform satisfactorily. Moreover, these tasks should be performed at the lowest level possible, preferably by local government, and only where this is not possible by regional or national government or internationally (Millon-Dessol, 1993; Kraemer, 1998; Brinkhorst, 1992).

The subsidiarity principle may be interpreted in different ways. It may be used to promote decentralisation and oppose centralisation or internationalisation. Alternatively, it can justify the independence of semi-governmental organisations, such as publicly financed schools and hospitals. The principle could also be used to promote the establishment of specialised “functional” government

bodies, often in conjunction with interest group representation on the governing board (cf. Barraqué, 2000; the Dutch waterboards: Mostert, 1998; Van de Ven, 1993; NVH/ IAHS, 1998). Subsidiarity may also be seen as a means to facilitate direct democracy. Finally, it could be used as an argument in favour of privatisation.

The subsidiarity principle can be taken to imply a kind of “inverted ladder of citizen participation”. The first step would be the highest level of PP: decision-making by the public, for example through water users’ associations. Lower levels of PP should be chosen only if the higher levels are not possible. Some applications of the subsidiarity principle, however, actually reduce PP. Interest group representation in functional government bodies may be limited to one or a few groups of water users only, and elections for such associations do not always function well (cf. Hernández-Mora & Llamas, 2000; Mostert, 1998). Moreover, corporatist arrangements could be put into place. Parliamentary and direct democracy could be replaced by a system of unaccountable semi-public organisations (Millon-Dessol, 1993). Finally, privatisation may increase the influence of individuals as consumers and shareholders, but reduce their influence as citizens.

4.4. Pluralism

Parliamentary and direct democracy and subsidiarity assume that there is such a thing as the “common good”, which can be revealed through parliamentary discussions or is embodied in an active and responsible citizenship or in an organically organised society. The pluralist theory of democracy, however, recognises only competing views as to the common good and competing interests. Government may be called upon to mediate between these different views and interests, but it should not impose a single official view. The “common good” cannot be based on research either, because research is never completely objective and always reflects the worldview of the researchers and those funding the research (cf. Linnerooth-Bauer, 1995; section 6.7 here).

The pluralist theory of democracy is linked closely with current practice in many parliamentary democracies. The starting point for many pluralists is the significant role of sectoral government bureaucracies and interest groups (section 4.1). For some, this is also the end point. They equate the concept of democracy with the current practice in so-called democracies as they see it. So-called “elitists”, for instance, define democracy as competition by political elites for the vote of the citizens, which is their interpretation of the current practice (Schumpeter, 1950). Many pluralists, however, see pluralism as an ideal to strive for. They discuss, for instance, institutional safeguards to ensure that all citizens exercise equal influence (Dahl, 1971) or call upon government to promote the variety of intermediary organisations (Frissen, 1996).

PP is not a major factor in the theory of pluralism. Individual citizens are expected to have only a limited interest in direct participation. Organised interests play a very important, but normally informal, role in political life. Formal PP may help to give a voice to those interests with fewer resources.

4.5. Undemocratic government

Finally, a few words about undemocratic government. Undemocratic government means, by definition, that the role of the public, and therefore of PP, is either non-existent or very limited. Nonetheless, PP could still be organised for pragmatic reasons. Undemocratic governments are not all-powerful and require a certain minimum degree of public acceptance to function, or rather a maximum

level of public opposition. Moreover, undemocratic governments may still benefit from the information and creative solutions provided by the public. Finally, international donors such as the World Bank often demand PP as a pre-requisite to lending.

5. The cultural context

PP can be best understood within its cultural context. “Culture” in this case refers to the patterns of emotion, thought and action that members of a specific group have in common. It consists of fundamental values, rituals, “heroes” and symbols. Culture colours the ideas of its members, predisposes them towards certain types of behaviour and gives meaning to these behaviours (Hofstede, 1991; Faure & Rubin, 1993). These types of behaviour in turn reinforce the relevant culture (Thompson *et al.*, 1990).

Using extensive survey material from 53 countries, Hofstede (1991) has identified five dimensions on which national cultures differ (Table 4). How countries score on these dimensions has important implications for PP. In countries with an individualistic culture, for example, PP methods that involve open discussion of differences may be effective. In countries with a more collectivist culture such methods could disrupt harmony and hinder conflict resolution.

Table 4. Dimensions of national cultures (Hofstede, 1991) and implications for PP.

Dimension	Implications for Public Participation
Power distance Degree to which members of a culture expect and accept (or totally reject) power differences	In countries with a large power distance the authorities will not embrace PP. Introducing PP may require strict regulations. The public is likely to be passive or cynical, so extra efforts are needed to mobilise them. A good option might be to organise PP through local institutions that are close to the people.
Individualism Degree to which members of a culture see themselves primarily as an individual or primarily as a group member	In collectivist cultures, not losing one’s “face” is an important concern. In the event of conflict intermediaries could be employed to facilitate concessions without losing face. (cf. Cohen, 1993) Methods such as gaming may conflict with the “dignity” of authorities. PP methods developed in individualist cultures such as the USA involving an open discussion of differences may not work.
Masculinity Degree to which members of a culture are expected to be assertive and competitive	In “masculine cultures” with an adversarial culture, such as the USA, PP could be used to prevent litigation. Adversarial methods such as citizen juries involving cross examination of witnesses and voting fit very well in such a culture. In “feminine” cultures consensus-based methods may be more appropriate (cf. Armour, 1995, 185–186).
Uncertainty avoidance Degree to which members of a culture feel uncomfortable with unknown or unpredictable situations	Countries with much uncertainty avoidance may have difficulties with the unpredictable character of participatory processes and are liable to organise PP only at a very late stage in the process. Both government and the public may function more effectively with a detailed PP work plan (cf. Diemel & Renn, 1995, 136). Research results could be the <i>basis for</i> discussions. In countries with little uncertainty avoidance research should be the <i>object of</i> discussion to prevent technical controversies (cf. Linnerooth-Bauer, 1990; Jasanoff, 1990).
Time frame Short-term versus long term orientation	No implications identified.

Culture can also influence PP indirectly, through the form of democracy adopted. As noted by Hofstede (1991), democracy is most likely in countries with an individualistic and egalitarian culture. To this may be added the fact that pluralist democracy is most likely if people feel comfortable with different views on the common good or, in other words, if there is little uncertainty avoidance. Direct democracy is most likely in very egalitarian countries. The *theory* of direct democracy, however, may be very attractive in countries with large power differences, since in such countries many reject authority completely. Traditional subsidiarity – society being built up of nested and juxtaposed systems – seems only possible in countries that are not extremely individualistic and egalitarian. Conversely, different forms of democracy promote different cultures.

Hofstede's theory has some limitations. First, subcultures can be at least as important as national cultures. As an example, environmentalists in one country may have more in common with environmentalists in other countries than with bureaucrats or entrepreneurs in their own country (cf. the “cultural theory” of Thompson *et al.* (1990) and Verweij (2000)). Secondly, for subcultures, other dimensions than the five listed may be important. Thirdly, within a country different subcultures may prevail at different times. In Japan, for instance, two types of negotiations alternate: the consensus type, which reflects a “feminine” subculture, and the warrior type, which is representative of a “masculine” one (cf. Faure, 2001). This makes behaviour less predictable than Hofstede's theory would suggest.

It should be noted that the concept of culture can be misused. Culture may be used to stereotype people or as an excuse for failing negotiations. If the concept is not specified and remains vague, it can be misused for “explaining” everything that cannot be explained otherwise. Nonetheless, consideration of the cultural context is essential, especially with respect to international basins (section 7) and if one considers adopting PP approaches that have been developed abroad.

6. Designing Public Participation processes

A number of issues need to be addressed when designing PP processes. This section discusses the various issues and provides an outline of the PP process. It focuses on “mid-level PP”: discussion, co-designing and co-decision-making (cf. Table 2).

6.1. *The “public” and the purpose of PP*

A basic issue is the identification of the different publics. The different publics need to be identified beforehand if one wants to approach them actively and avoid limited and unrepresentative responses. Moreover, many PP methods can accommodate only a limited number of participants and this necessarily involves a degree of selection.

Four criteria can be used for identifying the different publics:

1. Do they possess relevant information or new points of view?
2. Can they actively contribute to the development of new policy or projects? Do they have special skills?
3. To what extent will their interests be affected? Are all affected interests represented in proportion to their importance?
4. Can they obstruct decision-making or frustrate implementation?

The criteria used will depend upon the benefits sought and the level of PP envisaged (cf. Tables 1 and 2). Criteria 1 and 2 are especially relevant for improving the quality of decision-making and with respect to the PP levels “discussion” and “co-designing”. Criterion 3 is crucial for improving democracy and for (co-)decision-making, while criterion 4 is essential if implementation problems are to be prevented.

The benefits sought will depend on factors such as the information needs of the planners and the likelihood of implementation problems. Prevention of implementation problems is a legitimate aim, but also a very tricky one if it is the only aim. If the authorities do not give serious consideration to the reactions of the public, the public may become disillusioned and the result will be *less* public acceptance of decisions and *more* implementation problems (e.g. Assetto & Mumme, 2000; Edelenbos, 2000).

In practice another criterion is often used: are the potential participants likely to oppose the pertinent plan or project? This is not a very advisable criterion. Excluding opponents of a project from participating ensures a very smooth PP process, but may create serious problems later on and is, in fact, more likely to increase the level of opposition. Moreover, inviting only like-minded participants precludes the possibility of real innovation.

6.2. Actor analysis

Identifying the different publics usually requires some form of “actor analysis” (Hermans & Timmermans, 2001; IIAV, 2000). This should include “gender analysis” to account for the role of women in water management. Actor analysis may consist of the following elements:

- An identification of the issues at stake – including intangibles and issues related to the informal economy – and their historical development.
- A preliminary analysis of the relevant physical system or systems (basin, subbasin, irrigation system, etc) and the use made of these systems.
- An analysis of the relevant institutional structure, including the responsible organisations, the management tools available and relevant standards.
- The identification of the various governmental and non-governmental actors.
- An assessment of the perceptions and resources of the different governmental and non-governmental actors, including their goals and interests, their perception of the relevant systems, their perception of each other, their information needs, the time and money they have available, their level of education, their technical expertise and their communication skills.

Relevant actors may include the following:

- The different publics: individual citizens, companies, public interest and economic interest groups.
- Legislative bodies.
- Executive bodies: the cabinet, sectoral ministries, executive agencies.
- Different political parties, ethnic groups and regions.
- Individual politicians and civil servants.
- Government experts, commercial consultants and academics.

Actor analysis along these lines is helpful in determining the scope of PP (section 6.5). It may also

help to mobilise the different publics and facilitate meaningful participation. It could be discovered, for example, that some segments of the public lack sufficient financial resources. Their travel costs might then be reimbursed and other forms of financial support might be offered (Roberts, 1995). Moreover, free Internet connections could be offered to allow access to important information. This would also make PP more attractive (Woerkom, 1997).

6.3. *Roles and rules*

Before PP can begin, the roles of the different publics and the other parties should be clear. These roles can range from merely listening to answering questions, participating in discussions, designing policy and actually taking decisions. The assigned roles should reflect the intended level of PP and the capacities and expectations of the different actors. For individual PP methods specific rules may be needed, e.g. with respect to speaking time, voting and deadlines for submitting documents.

6.4. *Process managers and project organisation*

A role of particular importance is that of process manager, who is responsible for designing the process, facilitating meetings and liaising with the various government bodies involved. The decision as to who should become the process manager is therefore of some consequence. Appointing a staff member from the lead government body would facilitate follow-up and promote the integration of PP in the daily routine of that body. However, there is much in favour of an external process manager. Process managers should ideally be impartial with respect to the initiative at hand and should certainly be perceived as such. This is usually much easier to achieve in the case of an external process manager. Moreover, a specialist could be hired. It is also possible to appoint an internal process manager, but hire an independent PP professional in addition to support the process manager and facilitate meetings (Delli Priscoli, 1978a; Mostert *et al.*, 2001).

In general, process management is not a job for one person alone. An adequately resourced office or secretariat is needed to organise meetings, to send notifications to the media and to process written comments. In addition, a steering committee may be created in which the different government bodies involved are represented. This would be a good forum for discussion on the level and purpose of PP, the roles and rules and follow-up (Creighton, 2000).

6.5. *Scope*

Another topic on which the different government bodies involved must agree is the scope of PP: what can be debated and what cannot? The various legal and political constraints must be taken into account, including existing international obligations. Actor analysis as outlined in section 6.2 is useful in determining what these constraints are and how hard they are.

It is essential to give the public advance information on the scope to ensure that their expectations are appropriate. They can then focus on those aspects that are open for change and will not get disillusioned later on. It also allows the public to press for a broader scope to be adopted or to decide not to participate at all if they consider the scope to be too narrow.

6.6. Timing

PP may be conducted during different phases of the policy process. If it is implemented late, new alternatives cannot be considered without causing serious delays. Many concerns of the public may not be addressed and PP is therefore less likely to result in better decisions and greater public acceptance. On the other hand, if PP is commenced early in the policy process, it may be difficult to excite public interest. Plans at this stage are still quite vague and the potential consequences for the general public may not be fully appreciated. A way out of this dilemma might be to target different publics at different times: in the early phases (semi-)professional NGOs and large companies with sufficient time and expertise could be focused on, and in later phases, small NGOs, companies and individual citizens.

6.7. Policy research

Modern water management generally involves a lot of research. Even where water management is very participatory, water management research usually is not. This would be justified if research were a neutral activity providing objective input for management. The reality is, however, quite different. Many policy choices are already made in the research phase. Some alternatives receive attention while others do not, and certain effects are studied while others are not. Moreover, research results are never completely certain. This uncertainty tends to be “filled in”, consciously or unconsciously. How this is done depends on the values, worldview and interests of the persons concerned. Finally, the research results may be presented in different ways, each giving a subtly different impression of the merits of the plan or project studied (Collingridge & Reeve, 1986; Frankena, 1988; Jasanoff, 1990).

Usually the agency funding the research decides exactly what is to be studied and how the results are to be interpreted and presented. Genuinely participatory water management, however, requires that the public is involved in this as well. Ideally, water management research should initiate a social learning process. To facilitate this, the *experts* should see themselves not as providers of objective truths, but as facilitators and resource persons for both the authorities *and* the public. They should be open to receive information from the public and to hear their concerns. The *authorities* should be receptive to research and to the concerns of the public (e.g. Scheer, 1996). The *public* should ideally go through the same thought process and be exposed to the same information and arguments as the researchers and the authorities.

The research skills of the public are usually quite limited, but they can be involved in setting the terms of reference, and the research methods and results can be discussed with them. If models are used, the assumptions adopted should be made explicit and the models themselves should be sufficiently flexible to accommodate the dynamic character of participatory processes (Loucks, 1990; Ubbels & Verhallen, 2000).

6.8. Choice of methods

The final issue to be decided when designing participatory processes is the choice of PP methods. This choice should reflect a number of factors. Two factors have already been discussed in sections 3 and 5: the level of participation envisaged and the cultural context (see also tables 2 and 4). A third factor is the phase in the policy process. Methods with little structure such as “open spaces” may be appropriate

in the early phases to allow issues to be explored. More structured meetings may be called for when concrete proposals are tabled and decisions have to be taken.

Moreover, the character of the public concerned is important. Large formal meetings, such as public hearings, easily intimidate sections of the public that are not well educated or verbally skilled and consequently favour middle-class participants (Webler & Renn, 1995). The methods chosen should also not demand more time and attention from the different publics than can reasonably be expected. Methods that demand too much will result in “participation burn-out”. Too many separate PP processes – often the result of a sectoral, non-integrated approach to government – will have the same effect (cf. Roberts, 1995).

Finally, the demands made on the organisers should be considered. Some PP methods require skilled facilitators. Others require a large number of administrative staff and increased expenses for printing, mailing, advertising and rental of premises, etc. All necessary resources must be assessed in advance and made available. Where resources are limited, methods requiring fewer of them should be chosen.

6.9. *An outline of the PP process*

Effective PP requires a great deal of preparatory work and much follow-up. Table 5 sets out a proposed outline of the PP process from the perspective of the process manager. This outline is based partly on Roberts (1995) and Creighton (1999) and reflects the discussions in the previous sections. For low-level PP some steps may be skipped or simplified.

7. **International river basins**

PP in international river basins poses special challenges. By definition, different states are involved, often with different political systems, water management systems, cultures, languages, levels of development, goals and interests. The number of potential participants is often huge and distances are large. Moreover, upstream and downstream interests frequently conflict.

International river basins may be managed in different ways (Mostert, 1998; Mostert *et al.*, 2000). Each basin state could manage its part of the basin completely independently, but this is bound to cause international tension. Alternatively, the basin states can co-operate. In many river basins intergovernmental river basin commissions have been set up to coordinate the management of the basin by the basin states. In some river basins supranational river basin authorities exist, usually with a limited remit.

Where river basin commissions exist, PP can be organised both at the national and at the international level. PP at the national level is of prime importance since most decision-making powers remain at this level. This level is also closer to the individual citizens and NGOs. However, there is also a need for PP at the international level. Meaningful PP at the national level is only possible if decisions at the international level have not settled everything already.

At the international level the public may participate in different capacities. NGO representatives may participate in river basin commissions as observers, advisers, members of national delegations, or as full members in their own right. In addition, river basin commissions could actively disseminate information and organise opinion polls, etc.

PP in river basin commissions can be problematic if it means that each and every step of the national

Table 5. An outline of the PP process from the perspective of the process manager.

1. Initiation

The first step is the determination of the purpose of PP (level, effects aimed for) by the various government bodies involved. Already in this phase a process manager should be appointed. Some preliminary consultations on the PP process may be held with representatives of large NGOs, for instance.

2. Actor analysis

The second step is to conduct actor analysis (section 6.2).

3. Developing the process design

Next, the process design must be developed. It should pay attention to the purpose of PP, the scope (what may and may not be discussed), the different publics, decision-making and policy research, the project organisation, the roles of the different parties, the phasing of the process, and the PP methods to be used. The process design should make it clear what the public can expect. The public should be involved in the development of the process design as public support for the PP process will be essential for its success.

4. Kick-off meeting

PP could start with a “kick-off meeting.” At such a meeting the proposed participatory process can be presented and discussed with the public. In addition, an initial discussion of the substantive issues can take place.

5. Implementation

The implementation of the process design should be flexible enough to cope with new and unforeseen developments. However, expectations that have been raised should be respected. Major changes require the agreement of all individuals and organisations that have invested time and effort in the process.

6. Decision-making and feedback

Sooner or later a decision will have to be taken, e.g. a proposed project must be approved, modified or cancelled. Depending on the level of participation, the different publics may or may not be directly involved. In all cases their input should be taken seriously and they should receive feedback.

7. Evaluation

Participatory processes should be completed with an external and an internal evaluation. External evaluators who were not involved in the process can identify points for improvement that internal evaluators may miss. However, the parties involved should also make their own evaluation in order to learn from the experiences gained.

delegations immediately becomes public. This would seriously reduce the potential for exploring possible compromise solutions (Mastenbroek, 1996; Marty, 2001; Mostert, 2000). However, NGOs could agree to respect the confidentiality of the negotiations. NGOs have already participated in some international negotiations, such as the preparations for the UN-ECE protocol on environment and health.

Nationally, the public may be involved in the ratification and implementation of international agreements and in the preparation of these agreements. To provide serious follow-up to PP, the different states must coordinate their PP efforts. PP in all basin states should preferably be synchronised and the results communicated to the appropriate authorities in the other basin states. More intensive cooperation may be called for in the case of joint projects and plans.

Where supranational river basin authorities exist, PP should ideally be organised at the international level. The governing body of international river basin authorities usually consists of representatives of the basin states, so in theory PP could be organised at the national level. However, river basin authorities play a more independent role than river basin commissions.

Experience with PP at the international level is limited, but it does exist. The North American international bodies and the Rhine and the Danube commissions are the most active (e.g. Milich & Varady, 1999; Bouman, 1999; Assetto & Mumme, 2000; Mostert 2000, 2002; see for the Mekong and the Murray-Darling also Chenoweth & Bird, 2000). They have very informative websites, publish a large number of reports, which can usually be obtained free of charge or at low cost, and often hold consultations. Moreover, international NGOs have observer status and actively participate in the plenary commission and/or in various subsidiary organs. NGOs are often involved in national preparations for the meetings of the commission and in the implementation of its decisions.

8. Conclusion

Public participation can mean many different things. Often it is a formal bureaucratic exercise carried out only in order to fulfil procedural requirements or a PR exercise designed to “sell” government policy. However, it can also become an exercise in sharing responsibility and social learning and can promote sustainable water management. But to do so, PP should not be treated as a mere “technique”. Effective PP is, in fact, an entirely different mode of governance.

Effective PP requires knowledge of participatory approaches and methods. More importantly, however, it requires an open, transparent and outward-looking government that recognises that it cannot solve current water management problems on its own and has sufficient confidence to enter into direct discussion with its citizens. This is the real challenge of public participation.

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