

EC Sixth Framework Programme, Coordination Action SAS6-CT-2004-510636, April 2004 - December 2006

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## WHY PARTICIPATION?

Some feel that representative democracy is no longer sufficient in formulating environmental policy and making decisions on long-term issues. Reasons range from a lack of trust in the existing advisory and decision-making mechanisms to questioning underlying motives and communicated assertions of the governmental decision-making apparatus.

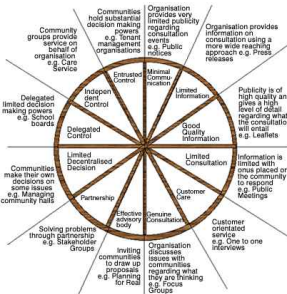


By and large there are no formal structures within that apparatus that allow different viewpoints and more socially framed values to be voiced and considered. These, however, are important in the debate about science and technology issues which are often complex, far-reaching, irreversible and characterised by conflicting interests. Also, substantial uncertainty (in terms of the occurrence of an event and its understanding and description) and ignorance exist.

The issue is not only about innovation and what type of progress is desirable and acceptable but also about when and how decisions are made and by whom. Current institutional arrangements are struggling with when and how to accommodate calls for earlier and more active involvement of ordinary citizens and all kinds of interested and affected parties in policy formulation.



**Citizens don't just want a vote – they deserve a voice in what happens, a say in decisions that impact their lives, and a government responsive to their needs and visions ...**



'Participatory processes' have been advanced as one way to broaden involvement in decision-making, driven by international agreements such as the Aarhus Convention, EC policies on Governance and recent EC Directives (notably the Water Framework Directive). In recent years, there have been many examples of formalised deliberation amongst and between ordinary citizens, stakeholders and specialists using methodological tools such as focus groups, consensus conferences, citizens' juries and scenario workshops. Yet despite a substantial body of research and past practical experience, approaches to public participation are often ill-considered, ad hoc and miss windows of opportunity to actually inform policy development.

## ISSUES OF REPRESENTATION AND SCALE

To date, decision-oriented participatory processes typically have taken place at the local level deciding over a specific issue (e.g. the siting of waste repository or processing facilities), but many technological developments and environmental challenges operate at the national and international scale. Some participatory processes have extended to policy concerns at the national scale but only few have actively involved large numbers of participants. International agreements and regulations, and their implementation at the national scale, however, increasingly encourage or require the inclusion of civil society in policy formulation processes. Of particular interest here are those which go beyond consultation and actually aspire to achieve active participation from an early stage.



Realizing this aspiration is less than straightforward. In addition to requiring sufficient resources (time, money and skills) participatory processes also pose fundamental issues regarding their transparency and accountability. A particular concern is how 'silent voices' (e.g. children, non-humans and future generations) can or should be represented.



AmericaSpeaks is a non-profit organization founded in 1995 to engage citizens in the public decisions that impact their lives. AmericaSpeaks develops innovative deliberative tools that can involve several thousand people.

Whether or not something is (or is perceived to be) representative extends to participants, views and outcomes. The focus here is on normative questions pertaining to formal participatory processes and their political and ethical legitimacy. O'Neill (2001)<sup>1</sup>, for example, argues for the need to clarify the role of small deliberative institutions (such as citizens' juries and consensus conferences) in democratic institutions, and proper sources of contestability of their outcomes.

<sup>1</sup> O'Neill, J., 2001. Representing people, representening nature, representing the world. *Environment and Planning C*, 19: 483-500.