

**'SUSTAINABLE SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT:
BETTER POLICY THROUGH PARTICIPATION'**
SUMMARY AND RECOMMENDATIONS

1. PROJECT INFORMATION

PROJECT: 'Sustainable sustainable development: Better policy through participation'
COMMISSIONERS: PPS Science Policy and PPS Sustainable Development
PROGRAMME: 'Action in support of the Federal Authority's strategic priorities'
RESEARCHERS: Kim Loyens and Dr. Steven van de Walle (Public Management Institute, K.U.Leuven)
PERIOD: 15th of September 2005 – 15th of May 2006

2. PURPOSE

This project consisted of two parts. In the first stage we analysed the **profile of participants** in the consultation on the Federal Plan for Sustainable Development. Focus was on the differences in reactions to the plan related to these profiles. The Belgian findings were integrated in and compared to the findings of an **international meta-analysis of the 'participation gap'**, i.e. the fact that some people participate while others don't. Based on these two analyses, **reasons for non-participation** have been mapped. Special attention went to the **non-organized citizen**, or the participant who is not related to pressure groups.

In the second stage, attention went to **processes that contribute to successful interactive policymaking**. Focus was on organizational aspects of participation. **Successful initiatives have been analysed**. Work packages included an analysis of existing **interactive policymaking manuals**, and certain **good practices**. Finally we developed some concrete strategies with a view to the improvement of the next consultation on the Federal Plan for Sustainable Development.

3. SUMMARY

Policymakers can have several **objectives** when they organize citizen participation: dissemination of information, legitimacy, efficiency and quality improvement of public policy. A participative approach has various **advantages**. First of all, participation can stimulate public support for policy decisions. Enrichment of policy decisions is a second benefit. After all, through citizen participation policymakers can collect a diversity of personal experiences, knowledge, skills, expertise, opinions and perspectives. Third, there is an ethical argument that emphasizes the intrinsic value of participation, because it can lead to a more open and direct democracy. The most fundamental **counter-arguments** refer to the fact that citizens lack the knowledge and skills to make a valuable contribution to the decision process and the fact that citizens are only after their own profit, without regard for the public interest. Furthermore the risk remains that citizen participation leads to the erosion of the

representative system. Participation can also slow down the decision process. Politicians are often **ambivalent** towards citizen participation. On the one hand they are more and more aware of the many advantages of citizen participation, on the other hand, many politicians still have 'cold feet'. After all, citizen involvement could lead to unworkable proposals or could complicate decision-making.

A common finding in participation research is that those who participate are not representative for the entire population or the target population, because of the 'participation gap'. It is found that those who participate consistently have the same profile. As a result there is a participation gap between those who participate systematically and who participate more and more, and those who don't participate and never will. **Education** has been found to play an important role in this, but also **sex, age, income, social position and ethnicity** can have an impact. Especially settled, high educated, male and prosperous middle to upper-class individuals participate in policymaking. Further distortion is caused by **attitudes and opinions**. In addition the threshold (e.g. financial and social) is often lower for **interest groups** than it is for individual, unorganized citizens. Interest groups play an important role in the education of democratic values. Moreover, their members are offered an opportunity to influence the public policy.

Lack of resources – such as civic skills, money and free time – is often considered to be an explanation for the non-participation of certain groups. People with a low education often lack the necessary skills or financial resources. One can develop civic skills through education, but also by participating in social organizations or interest groups. Spare time does play a role in the quantity of time spent on citizen participation, but doesn't have an impact on the fact that one participates. Another explanation is connected with **recruitment**. Those who already have the necessary resources, are more often than others recruited for participation in political and social life. **Motivation** and interest also play an important role. The willingness to participate in policymaking is higher if the topic is **connected to everyday life** of the public, and when financial or psychological (e.g. frustration, missed alternatives) **costs** are minimized. Citizen participation in the policy domain of sustainable development is especially difficult, because the general public is not familiar with the **abstract concept**.

There is also a digital gap. Although computerization and the digital society have created diverse **new opportunities**, certain groups are not able to use any of those modern technologies because they lack skills, knowledge and financial resources. The number of persons using the internet has increased radically in the period between 1997 and 2006. Still, there is a clear distortion when you look at the **profile of internet users**. Walloon families utilize it less often than those in Flanders. Especially young people and higher educated persons with a job use the internet regularly. **The unprivileged** are confronted with financial, intellectual, psychological and social barriers.

A highly important question is whether the participation gap is – or is not – a problem. On the one hand the answer depends on the **reasons why people don't participate**. There is less of a problem when people just lack motivation or interest to participate. The situation becomes more and more problematic when certain groups are systematically incapable to participate. On the other hand the answer is related to the **objectives** of the concrete participation initiative. The group of participants has to be representative for the target population when policymakers want to build public support for their decisions. Representation is not necessary when the main objective is to collect creative and new solutions for a certain problem.

Bridging the participation gap is a difficult task. Verba refers to three possibilities in his '**Civic Voluntarism Model**': reducing social differences in society, recruiting persons who would otherwise never be recruited and stimulating motivation of less well-off people by issue-based mobilization. Other **possible initiatives** include increase of potential impact of citizens on policy decisions, feedback about the results of citizen participation and recognition of the contribution of citizens.

In 2004 the second consultation on the Federal Plan of Sustainable Development has been organized. This consultation had various **objectives**, such as quality improvement, broadening public support and information dissemination. The methods or instruments of participation, however, were not adjusted to those objectives. An important bottleneck in the consultation was the **readability** of the document. The text was too complex, confusing and abstract for the average citizen. This problem was somewhat compensated by the summarizing brochure. Another problem was the **perceived impact** of the consultation.

Those who participated (i.e. individual citizens and social organizations) in the second consultation on the Federal Plan for Sustainable Development are not representative for the population. As for the **individuals**, mainly education, sex, age and work situation played an important role. There also was an overrepresentation of **environmental organizations**. The analysis of the **profile** of those who responded to certain themes shed light on interesting facts. The first conclusion is that organized stakeholders responded relatively more than individual citizens. The reactions of those who replied via the internet were less extensive than those who filled in a questionnaire on paper. Furthermore respondents from Brussels reacted more on certain themes in comparison with individuals or organizations from Flanders. As for the individual citizens the source of information played an important role. Those who were informed by the press reacted relatively more than those who heard about the consultation on the radio (advertising spot). Education had also an impact. Higher educated citizens responded more than those with a lower diploma, and reacted on a different kind of topics.

In the framework for choosing specific methods or techniques for citizen participation it is the first essential to set certain **objectives**. The second consultation on the Federal Plan for Sustainable Development (2004) had seven objectives. After that one has to determine the potential impact of the participation initiative. For this purpose the **ladder of participation** can be a useful instrument. Edelenbos and Monnikhof distinguish between five types of citizen involvement: information, consultation, advice, coproduction and co-decision-making. Each level of the ladder offers a wide selection of techniques. Finally the **target group(s)** can play a role in the selection of a concrete method for citizen participation (e.g. general public, organized stakeholders, experts, young people, the unprivileged, etc.).

4. POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

In this part we list some policy recommendations resulting from the research project 'Sustainable sustainable development: Beter policy through participation'. We first focus on citizen participation in general, and then concentrate on strategies for the improvement of the next consultation on the Federal Plan for Sustainable Development.

Recommendations for citizen participation

- 1) At the start of a participative project it is important to set **concrete objectives**. The group of participants has to be representative for the target population when policymakers want to stimulate public support for their decisions. Representation is not necessary when the main objective is to collect creative and new solutions for a certain problem.
- 2) It is essential to explain the **scope and preconditions** of the initiative (e.g. impact, time schedule), so that participants will have realistic expectations.
- 3) A **balanced mediamix** is important during the announcement and realization of the project. Every instrument has its own unique advantages and disadvantages.
- 4) The willingness to participate increases as the theme is more **connected with the everyday life** of the general public.
- 5) '**Alibi consultations**' must be avoided, i.e. consultations on issues that are already decided. The objective in those cases is 'information' and not 'consultation'.
- 6) **Feedback** about the results of the participation project is crucial.

Recommendation for the next consultation

- 1) Trying to realize seven objectives in one consultation on the Federal Plan for Sustainable Development is probably **too ambitious**. A better alternative is to concentrate on a few objectives that have a high priority. One can hold on to the seven objectives only if a diverse mix of participation instruments will be used.
- 2) We developed five strategies for the improvement of future consultations on the Federal Plan for Sustainable Development.
 - In the first strategy we maintain more or less the status quo. As in 2004 one organizes a **broad consultation** about the entire plan, on condition that a few adjustments are made such as readability and length of the document.
 - The second strategy is consisted of **six uniform consultations**, each covering one theme in the Federal Plan. That way the public can react on the entire plan. This strategy has of course staffing and financial implications.
 - A third possibility is a consultation about a selection of themes. This selection is based on certain **priorities** (e.g. annual political priorities). This strategy makes it possible to involve the general public profoundly in a certain subject, without financial implications.
 - The fourth strategy also consists of a selection of topics, but this selection is based on the **fase in the policy cycle**. Policymakers distinguish between issues for information dissemination, consultation, coproduction, etc. By doing so it is possible to involve citizens in a diversity of topics, while the participants are informed about their specific role.
 - In the fifth strategy, focus is on the **target group(s)**. Technical and abstract topics can be discussed by organized stakeholders, while individual citizens can be involved in more accessible themes.