

Towards a social pact in sustainability matters:
**Concluding research remarks on participation in the Belgian
sustainable development policy context.**

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1. Introduction

The PODOI research project titled “Towards a social pact for sustainable development” has focussed on the study of participatory processes in the Belgian policy making context. In the process we have first conceptualised sustainable development as a policy concept and have analysed how it is operationalised in actual policy making on different terrains. That part of the research has been reported in several contributions to the DWTC paper series and elsewhere. In this contribution, we wish to draw a number of conclusions on the participatory context of sustainable development, based on the observations we have made during the last 5 years of research. In that sense it is not a theoretical reporting, but rather a policy oriented set of “reality checks” that build on field research.

The assumption in most literature on the societal and political aspects of sustainable development seems to be that sustainable development in general and environmental policy-making more specifically require a different form of relationships between the state and civil society. The literature often refers to 'green policy-making' as a more participatory and integrated process involving new actors and new forms of decision-making processes. These involve new institutional arrangements, new information needs, a different science base, a shift in the relationship between the state and certain sectors of society which have been previously labelled as 'suspicious' (e.g. the green movement), etc.

Based on an analysis of the Belgian model of state-society relations and participatory practices on environmental issues and sustainable development I will test whether this underlying assumption to which so much lip-service is paid is correct and if so, which form and content this new form of state-society relations has taken.

Important questions for this analysis include whether environmental policy making and/or the wider topic of sustainable development are really opening up the process for new topics, actors, ways of making and implementing policy and finally whether has it led to any results in terms of institutional changes, and the effectiveness of environmental policy-making.

The starting point for my argument is the fact that sustainable development is more than anything else a process of social change. This supposes that social actors modify their social interaction and behavior in the direction of a more sustainable society. The implicit hypotheses in the discourse of most policy-makers and theorists is that this modification can only be attained through a process of true social participation.

For the purpose of my analysis, we will define participation much broader than what is usually done in the academic and practice oriented policy literature. This literature seems to

suggest strongly that participation is a matter of representation of traditional representative groups –social movements- in formal advisory bodies. Participation is thus reduced to a proces for specific groups which provides input in certain policy-making proceses at certain policy-making levels. Although we recognize this form of participation as important, we wish to discuss the limitations of this approach and the dangers associated with it. This will be done in light of the participatory history of another important project of social change from the past wich has largely defined the context for policy-making participation, interest group representation and the broader societal role of social movements in Belgium (and much of North Western Europe), namely the evolution towards a consultative welfare state model. We will compare the participatory logic behind the current position of labor unions and draw a comparison with the current theoretical approaches and praxis concerning sustainable development issues.

2. Defining participation in policy-making contexts¹

Participation has been central to the development of the concept of sustainable development as a policy discours. The Brundtland report ‘Our Common Future’ (1987) defined it as a necessary condition for sustainable development. It talked about “a political system that secures effective citizen participation in decision-making”². The same emphasis was present during the UNCED-conference in Rio (1992). In each of the five agreements coming out of Rio the need for participatory decision-making is underlined. Principle 10 of the Rio-declaration puts things very clearly: “Environmental issues are best handled with the participation of all concerned citizens, at the relevant level”.³

In addition, participation is omnipresent and central in Agenda 21; the concept of participation is woven through the 40 chapters. Chapter 23 is completely devoted to the input of social groups. The idea that development has to go hand in hand with the active input of a well informed society to be called ‘sustainable’ is increasingly accepted. To support this reasoning, a number of ‘advantages’ of participation are mentioned in the literature.⁴ First, the active involvement of civil society brings new ideas, diverse experiences, and expertise to the policy process and hence encourages and supports the development of alternative policy options and outcomes. In this way the knowledge base of traditional policy-makers is broadened. Second, participatory policy-making reduces the risk for conflicts. Third,

¹ This part of the paper is an abbreviated version of former research reported in light of the PODOI program funded by the DWTC.

² WCED. Our Common Future. (1987)

³ The Rio Declaration on Environment and Development (1992).

⁴ Organization of American States (1999).

participation provides the possibilities for cooperation and coordination between governments and civil society, which increases mutual trust and long lasting co-operative networks.

Given the positive expectations attached to participatory processes, “sustainable development” has implicitly become a normative prescription for state-society relations. The official discourse as well as the academic and social movements literatures on sustainable development seem to suggest that the project of sustainable development will *require* not only a change in the content of policy-making (e.g. more attention to environmental issues in economic or energy policies) but also in the form and procedures of the process. Changing the policy process hence becomes a normative prescription to reach the ultimate goal of sustainability.

Examples of this reasoning can be found in the international policy documents which officially define the context for sustainable development policy-making. Agenda 21 defines the problem as follows:

Prevailing systems for decision-making in many countries tend to separate economic, social and environmental factors at the policy, planning and management levels. ... An adjustment or even *a fundamental reshaping of decision-making*, in the light of country-specific conditions, may be necessary if environment and development is to be put at the center of economic and political decision-making. (Agenda 21 chapter 8, 8.2)⁵

The fact that Agenda 21 puts so much emphasis on the participatory role of the so-called ‘major groups’ underlines the issue at stake. Agenda 21 is full of recommendations to change policy making toward an inclusive process with room for discussion, joint design and joint implementation of policies. It suggests a multi-stakeholder type institutional approach with the goal of empowering citizens and creating social partnerships. This also includes transparency in decision and policy making and an improved and stronger institutional capacity

3. The definition of participation

3.1 A broader view on participation

For a concept that is so central to sustainable development, participation is strikingly poorly developed in the literature. The implicit assumption is that participation is primarily or even exclusively played out in the sphere of formal political interaction. That is, a number of groups are chosen to represent society in institutions designed to let them voice opinions

⁵ My emphasis

which will then be used by politicians and public servants as input in policy-making processes. In the sphere of sustainable development, this approach finds an emanation in a number of traditional advisory bodies for environmental policy-making, socio-economic policy-making and more recently in advisory bodies especially set up for sustainable development issues, e.g. the national councils for sustainable development. This seems to be, as we will try to demonstrate, a rather narrow and in addition not very fruitful conceptualization of participation. Participation according to its ethymological meaning signifies the following: to be a part of, to have a part in, being a member of, to work together on something, consultation, co-decision

It is important to notice that nowhere have we found a definition of participation that is limited to the dominant policy praxis, namely: “participation is the right of groups to have a seat in consultative bodies where they are allowed to voice their opinion.” To the contrary, from the definitions mentioned above we can conclude that participation is a much broader concept. It includes many more forms and is more action oriented than the dominant paradigm suggests. Using the meaning of participation in “normal” language we translate the aforementioned definitions in the following broad conceptualization of the participatory dimension of sustainable development:

Participation is the fact that social actors are contributing consciously through their social actions to the process of social change in the direction of a more sustainable society.

This approach is also congruent with the history of social movements and their role in processes of social transformation. Starting from this approach a number of issues and misunderstandings become clear and can be eliminated.

1. The participatory dimension is not limited to the political arena: several activities which fall under the term *social actions* can be part of the participatory context of sustainable development: people’s economic activities as producers and consumers, people’s political actions as voters or as public figures, artistic expressions, religious activities with public orientations, ethical dimensions of all sorts of “normal”activities, etc. This basic point broadens the scope of participation enormously and at the same time puts an emphasis on the responsibility of multiple social activities.
2. The participatory dimension is *not necessarily limited to the activities of collective actors*; individuals are full actors in the process as well.
3. Participation supposes a link with a broader societal context. My definition looks at social actions of people and groups in function of a process of societal change. This presumes conscious interaction with other social actors (individuals or collectivities) aimed at the

modifications of social institutions. Institutions in this context are to be understood as certain forms of social interaction that are driven by codified social norms. These institutions can be formal (E.g. consultative bodies, the educational system) or informal (e.g. the free market economy) and they can be inside or outside the formal political arena.

4. The social institutions and the process of social change can be seen as directly impacting individual social actors or can be defined in a broader social context. This is important because there seems to be an underlying assumption that participation is somehow connected to a macro-context and has little relevance for the individual context of social actions of individuals.
5. Participation is explicitly not to be confused with consultation. Certain forms of consultation are participatory in nature, but consultation is just one of the many forms participatory interaction can take.

It is clear that participating in the process of sustainable development is much broader than generally presented in the literature or the realization thereof in participatory practices. This is important because the discourse on participation is largely going in one direction (consultation) and is usually affirming the dominant way of societal organization with a strong prevalence for the state as main actor and point of reference. By explicitly not doing this in our theoretical conceptualization of participation we do not mean to go to the other extreme and claim that the state is not an important actor in or a forum for participatory practices. We wish to look at participation and the state, however, as a form of participation that can or cannot be useful to come to certain forms of desired social change.

3.2 Political participation

After having defined the broader context of participation we can now direct our attention to collective political participation without putting it forward as an exclusive or even privileged form of participation. From the international reference texts which were mentioned at the beginning of the paper we can distil a number of crucial elements for political participation in light of sustainable development.

1. There is a mentioning of participation as taking place in different *political systems*. Linked to this concept are a number of mostly implicit assumptions about the functioning of political systems. This means in concreto that not all political systems are equally adapted to incorporate the participatory dimension of sustainable development. It is obvious that the permeability of the state and state institutions are very much dependent on the kind of political system. In other words, the institutional setting in which

participation takes place has large consequences on its appearance, its form, content, output and effectiveness.

2. The concept of *citizen*, as used in the Brundtland report, is referring to the political-social dimension of each individual person. This dimension can be individually or collectively defined and lived. Agenda 21, however, is privileging the collectivity by referring to *social groups*. This is important for a society in which a long tradition of collective action exists that is personified by the role of institutionalized social movements.
3. The reference to *decision-making* suggests that participation is possible in the full cycle of policy-making processes. It can be therefore be integrated in the agenda-setting, the actual policy development phase, the implementation phase, the control phase, the evaluation and the feedback phase. This is an important point because most of the literature and most practices put a lot of emphasis on the agenda-setting stage and to a lesser extent on the feedback phase. The phases of actual policy-making and policy-implementation are much less mentioned when it comes to participatory practices. However, those are precisely the most important phases in terms of impact when it comes to policy-making.
4. There is often mention of *effective* participation. This presupposes two important realities: first, ineffective participation also exists. This seems like a self-evident statement, but the evaluation of many participatory processes suggests that this is often the case. Second, it must be possible to scale participation on an effectiveness scale. This is in however, much more difficult than evident.
5. Agenda 21 refers to the necessity of *commitment and genuine involvement* by social groups as an important element in participation. The implicit hypothesis is that sustainable development requires a certain underlying and broad societal support. This aspect is surprisingly little researched. It is in addition, rather strange that this commitment and involvement is explicitly expected from "social groups" and seen as self-evident of governments and state institutions. This seems, to say the least, to be a far stretch of reality in a large majority of the countries.
6. Finally, the literature often mentions a *relevant level for participation*. The reference seems to apply to both the level of participation as the level of decision-making involved. These two are however, not necessarily the same for all actors involved. It may well be that the most appropriate level of participation for most citizens is the local level even though the decision-making on an issue is at the higher level (i.e. national, provincial).

Given this approach to political participation we define *collective political participation* (public participation) as follows:

Political participation in the context of sustainable development encompasses every political interaction between the state and civil society or between public actors aimed at solving societal problems. This includes the process by which governments and civil society have a dialogue, form partnerships to solve problems, exchange information and also the interactions between the state and civil society during the development, the implementation and the evaluation of policies, programs and projects aimed at a more sustainable future.

4. Case study : Participation in the Belgian context of sustainable development

In light of the previous discussion on participation as a societal goal and a political reality we will now turn to the Belgian situation to illustrate the deficiencies of the dominant approach and point at opportunities for improvement.

4.1 Belgium's form of neo-corporatist state society relations and its implications for participatory practices

The Belgian system of policy-making can be categorized as an almost perfect example of Schmitterer's and Van den Bulcke' neo-corporatist model of state-society relations. In the post-worldwar II period a system of state society relations has evolved based on neo-corporatist interest group participation. A limited number of groups in civil society are privileged by the government as preferential partners to give input on a number on important problems. In exchange for their input (and often control!) over the content of policies on these issues, the interest groups actively defend and sometimes even implement the state's policies. They do this through defending certain policies in their discourse and if necessary by forcing the issue at the level of their 'members'. This type of policy-making and participatory process which is de facto a special case of state-society relations is largely based on the socio-economic ordering of western societies. Employers and employee organizations are the chosen segments of civil society to participate in policy-making.

The Belgian form of neo-corporatism goes hand in hand with Lijphart's consociational democracy. Given the three lines of division that run through the Belgian polity, namely language, religion and economic differences, the whole state is balkanized into little domains which are then divided almost on a quota system basis by representatives of civil society coming from the different segments of the three divisional lines. This system has led to the pacification of a large number of problems. Indeed for a country with that many serious divisional lines, political conflicts have been fought out remarkably civilized. It has also led, on the other hand to a very special form of state society relations when evaluated from the

perspective of civil participation. The state is virtually captured by those groups who have access to the neo-corporatist set of exchange mechanisms between state and civil society. It is closed, on the other hand, for those who fall outside the system.

4.2 Institutional responses to the participatory dimension of sustainable development

Environmental problems and more recently the sustainable development issue have put this system under serious criticism and pressures. Environmental groups, development NGOs, grass roots movements and others who were excluded from the dominant system of exchange between the state and civil society strongly objected to the fact that these new social issues were discussed and framed in a non-representative fashion.

The government has reacted to these pressures rather slowly and generally without much enthusiasm. In recent years, however, it has lived up to its international promises and has created an institutional framework for a more participatory process of decision-making for sustainable development. This has led to the establishment of a national council for sustainable development with representatives of NGOs, consumer groups, industrial groups, employers and employees as well as scientists and public officials. Other consultative bodies which include broad representation now exist at the level of the Regions (Flanders, Wallonia, Brussels).

It is clear that these new demands in content and form on the participatory nature of state-society relations and sustainable development policy-making have led to new problems and challenges as well as frustrations for those involved. Some of the more important problems include:

1. The new consultative bodies do not have the same standing and possibilities to influence the government. Their place in the decision-making process is rather insignificant compared to the traditional neo-corporatist bodies for interest group-state negotiations.
2. The traditional interest groups (employers organizations and labor unions) are still rather dominant in the process. They are heading most of the new consultative bodies, and more importantly, they are still dominant 'when things really matter' (e.g. the energy and CO₂ debate).
3. There is a serious problem for the traditional groups to enter into the logic of the debate on these new themes. Their (mostly 19th century) ideologies are at odds with the new demands, they don't have the capacities to handle their new duties, they have a difficult time establishing working relations with groups whom they considered marginal (or not really important at best) previously.

4. The environmental, development and other groups which are now included have difficulties positioning themselves in these new participatory structures: on the one hand they see an opportunity to be part of a new participatory process of interaction between the state and civil society. On the other hand they have to decide how much they are willing to be co-opted and where they want to allocate their usually scarce resources.

It seems obvious that the new institutional arrangements have created some opportunity for more inclusive state-society relations and public participation. We have to be careful, however, to distinguish between the formal existence of these changes and their real impact.

4.3 Participation as a *deus ex machina* in policy processes

Through different policy evaluation exercises in the last several years we have come to notice that interest group, social movement or citizen participation is increasingly seen as a sort of magic potion to make policy processes smoother, to make decisions acceptable and to legitimize policy action. At different policy levels and in nearly all policy domains do we find the call to install participatory bodies, mostly of the formal political advisory nature which we have described above. Examples include local environmental councils, the call for local sustainability councils, zoning and spatial planning councils, etc. at the level of the municipality and the province. Newer calls for participatory bodies are for example wildlife councils, water councils, sustainability councils for public (ex EU) funding, nature councils, etc.

The evaluation of the functioning and impact of these participatory bodies is still in its infancy stages. Recent research on Municipal and Provincial environmental councils and on voluntary agreements between the Flemish government and the municipalities and the provinces demonstrates that the participatory praxis is far from obvious and requires a supportive institutional structure to function well (cf. *Infra*). It is safe to say for the moment that there is not enough evidence to substantiate the claim that participation per se has a large positive impact on the effectiveness of environmental and sustainability oriented policy programs. The evidence seems to suggest that participatory bodies do perform their formal functions fairly well and have been effective in that sense but that they are still far removed from being catalysts for farther reaching participatory practices. In the following part we will try to demonstrate why that is the case.

5. The reductionist approach to participation and the history of legitimacy through action.

One of the consequences of limiting participation to formal presence in consultative bodies is that the emphasis is completely diverted away from participation through action. The fact that a number of groups have the opportunity to participate in debate and the formulation of advises for national policy making has serious consequences when studied from a more action oriented perspective.

Those groups represented in the most powerful advisory bodies in Belgium's policy-making have gained the legitimacy to represent certain interests in society through social action. They were in the most literal meaning of the word social *movements*. The historically most important and impressive example is beyond any doubt the history of the labor unions in that respect. In the 19th and first half of the 20th century they concentrated on action and not on participation in advisory bodies. Indeed, they were not invited, nor wanted in that form of participation. They organized workers, supported actions whether they be strikes or educational activities, they build local organizations step by step, ... In other words they participated in the larger project of more equitable socio-economic development and recognition of the rights of 'regular people' by focussing on effective realizations.

It is exactly because they were getting a large impact through their actions and because they were influencing the views and behavior of people that they became organizations that could not be ignored by employees and governments. If they were invited as parties during negotiations, they had earned this right through action, not because the employers or the state were so good-hearted to invite them. The current neo-corporatist system was largely developed after world war II in a number of negotiation and advisory bodies where the 'social partners' (i.e. employers organizations and labor unions) discuss and decide on social and economic matters of the highest importance with the appropriate authority.

This is in sharp contrast with the current vision on participation in advisory bodies. The fact to be invited and represented often precedes any serious action or legitimacy in the field.

Once invited to the table, many groups find out that they don't have the necessary capacity to live up to the expectations. They are spending a large part of their scarce institutional resources on their representation in consultative institutions. They can often not even answer to the question whom they represent. They come to the conclusion that the newer participatory processes are only marginally recognized as really important by the government and the traditional social partners. The question is then: is it all worth the effort and what is the impact.

The link between this rather negative evaluation and the lack of legitimacy through action is striking. The lack of a serious basis of public support that can be demonstrated by for example membership numbers, financial contributions, actual activities on the issues they represent limits the legitimacy they have in the whole process. The fact that they spend so much of their institutional capital on ‘sitting in meetings’ and ‘voicing opinions’ prevents them from being more involved in action-oriented activities at the level of citizens or groups.

Many of the environmental groups for example would have a hard time explaining what exactly it is they do that would legitimize their presence in committees and advisory boards except for research and lobbying. It is striking that these activities were developed in the case of labor unions after the public support base was large enough and the membership contributions significant enough to build a professionally staffed organization.

6. Local agenda 21: an opportunity for different forms of participatory policy-making?

Local Agenda 21 is often mentioned in the context of participation and citizen action. In that sense one could expect that LA21 provides the opportunity for different forms of participation. The following assumptions are hence associated with LA21:

- The local level allows for a more participatory of policy-making because of its proximity to the population
- Local governments are not perceived as distant power and control institutions over which no or little control is possible
- Involvement of local groups can be much more oriented towards actual involvement in environmental and other projects
- The link between citizen activity and the results of these actions is much clearer and hence more motivational

These assumptions seem reasonable as the local level of policy making seems to meet a number of the prerequisites often mentioned for more participatory policy-making.

The Belgian reality is unfortunately rather unfit to draw many conclusions on the participatory nature of LA21. Very few cities have a LA21 that is in fact operational and having a significant influence on local policy-making. To associate LA21 to the large input of participatory processes for this moment seems therefor like stretching reality. Recent research on local participation in local environmental policy making suggests in addition that the interest and motivation of many actors is not always very high. Only about one half of the members of municipal environmental council for example are present at the meetings. This number increases to absence rates of 70 and 80% for a number of the groups represented in these councils.

7. Conclusions

The current conceptualization of participation is based on a narrow definition which leads to a ditto operationalization. What is largely absent is a more action oriented involvement of old and new social movements and of citizens. This lack translates in a lack of legitimacy, a certain laxness, and hence rather limited impacts on actual policy implementation in the spheres of environment and sustainable development.

In conclusion we would like to plead for the following elements to be taken seriously when planning further participation in policy processes:

- More attention should be devoted to actually involving social movements and citizens.
- Social movements and citizens should be involved throughout the policy process, not only in the agenda setting and planning stages
- If governments and social movements really believe in the necessity of strong participation in light of effective policy measures this should be translated in much stronger institutional support for participatory processes: this means investing in training, administrative support, feed-back, communication, etc.
- From a researcher's point of view it also includes increased attention for serious policy planning and evaluation as well as process support of and for public participation.

In other words, being sympathetic to the idea that participation is important and indeed matters, we plead for taking it much more serious as a policy topic and domain. Participation is not a self evident, cheap solution. It is not the deus ex machina or the oil that make the engine run.

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