Stakeholder Participation Guidance for the Netherlands Environmental Assessment Agency

Main Document

Stakeholder Participation Guidance for the Netherlands Environmental Assessment Agency: Main Document
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The Stakeholder Participation Guidance for the Netherlands Environmental Assessment Agency consists of the following three volumes:

- Main Document (550032007)
- Checklist (550032006)
- Practitioner's Manual (550032009)

A Dutch edition is also available.

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The Netherlands Environmental Assessment Agency (MNP) functions as the interface between science and policy, producing independent assessments on the quality of the environment for people, plants and animals to advise national and international policy-makers.

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Preface

Insight in the knowledge and views of stakeholders outside of the Netherlands Environmental Assessment Agency (among whom are societal actors, policy makers and politicians, but also scientists from universities, institutes, councils and 'planning bureaus') is crucial for our agency to be able to provide high quality and relevant information to the cabinet, the parliament and society at large.

After the first edition of the RIVM/MNP Guidance for Uncertainty Assessment and Communication was published in 2003, the Netherlands Envinronmental Assessment Agency (MNP) had therefore decided to add a more detailed guidance to the part dealing with stakeholder participation. Building on the pre-study performed by Esther Turnhout and Pieter Leroy of Radboud University Nijmegen in 2004 ('Participating in uncertainty: A literature review on applying participation in the delivery of scientific policy advice', publication number 550002008, in Dutch), Maria Hage and Pieter Leroy have developed the current Stakeholder Participation Guidance.

The Stakeholder Participation Guidance can be used as a stand-alone instrument besides the Guidance for Uncertainty Assessment and Communication. An integration of both instruments has been facilitated by publishing a second edition of the Guidance for Uncertainty Assessment and Communication.

The goal of these guidances is not to prescribe protocols, but to stimulate that scientific advisors for policy think critically about how they go about in performing their projects. They are specifically meant to generate reflection. Besides that, the documents are full of useful hints and information.

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Stakeholder Participation Guidance

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Notes on the use of the Stakeholder Participation Guidance

This document presents a Guidance for Stakeholder Participation, which is intended to support and guide project managers at the Netherlands Environmental Assessment Agency (MNP) in their choices in the area of stakeholder participation. Apart from the Guidance itself, there are two other important documents: the Checklist and the Practice Guide. The content and purpose of these three documents are summarised below.

The Stakeholder Participation Guidance consists of three volumes:
- Main Document: to guide those responsible for making choices: why, what in, who, how?
- Checklist: a short operationalisation of the Guidance
- Practice Guide: to explain what methods are available; what they are suitable for; what can be done in-house; what is best outsourced

Participation and how to organise it is highly dependent on context. MNP projects and products vary in terms, for instance, of the type of assessment involved, time scale, spatial scope and policy environment. This variety makes it impossible to write a 'cookbook' with recipes for every situation. Despite this constraint, the Guidance aims to help project leaders to think about participation in a purposeful way. The Guidance is organised around a number of guiding questions:

- Why do you want participation?
- What should the participation be about?
- How much participation do you want?
- Who do you want to involve?
- What form are you choosing?

To guide you through the participation jungle without losing your way, the Guidance opens with a short chapter to familiarise you with what participation means in different contexts (chapter 1), followed by an examination of what participation signifies for the Netherlands Environmental Assessment Agency (chapter 2). It is important to formulate clear goals when organising participation. Participation is not an end in itself for the MNP, which is why chapter 2 addresses the 'why' question first.

Only then can we look at the assessment itself: 'what should participation actually be about'? Should it be about knowledge, methods, scientific uncertainties, policy options or interests? The substance and organisation of participation depends on the purpose of the assessment. Chapter 3 deals with this. Chapter 3 also prepares the ground for the next question: participation 'with whom' exactly?

Chapter 4 will show that the choice of participants is also dependent upon the chosen aims and issues, and that these factors are even more important when you are deciding on which method of participation to choose. Participation methods are left to the last chapter, because they depend on the answers to all the other questions being clear. Chapter 5 explains the implications of various aspirations for participation and what forms suit these different aims. This chapter therefore addresses the issues of the 'scale' of participation and the 'form' of participation.

If you are short of time, it would be best to go straight to chapter 3, which develops the theme of participation in the context of a concrete project.

1 Participation – worth considering

Participation is a broad concept with a long history. Participation occurs in many different contexts: participation in political movements, participation in organisations, participation in social processes, participation in political decision-making, participation in knowledge production, and so on. Participation takes many different forms, therefore, which come about for different reasons and which have diverse aims. Participation can be won by force by activists, but it can also be organised. What participation involves, is highly dependent on context.

For the Netherlands Environmental Assessment Agency (MNP), participation has a specific meaning and is closely linked with the role of the agency. In broad terms, this role is to produce different forms of knowledge to support political decision-making processes whilst at the same time remaining politically neutral. 'Knowledge' is the key word for participation at the MNP. Participation in this context is not an end in itself, therefore, but in the first instance a means of guaranteeing the quality of the assessments. The participation we are concerned with here is the participation of stakeholders, interpreted broadly as essentially anyone who may be involved or affected. Certainly where there is a large measure of uncertainty about the science, it is appropriate to have a diverse range of perspectives from different stakeholders. Participation is then an important tool by which to make these pluriform perspectives explicit. We will return later to the connection between this Stakeholder Participation Guidance and the Guidance for Uncertainty Assessment and Communication published earlier (MNP/UU 2003).

Participation can bring the MNP many benefits, provided it is used well. Possible benefits include the presence of more and more varied knowledge; the inclusion of different perspectives; the use of the creative problem-solving capacities of a group; the fact that influential actors get to know about the end product and that it ties in with their way of thinking. For all these reasons, a product produced through participation can contribute to better quality decision-making. The aim of the Guidance is to help project leaders to think about participation strategies at an early stage.

Participation does not, however, call for unqualified enthusiasm. Organising participation is very demanding on human resources, time and money. This does not mean that participation cannot be more efficient and effective than pure desk research, but that time and energy have to be invested for it to be organised well. Moreover, you are dealing with stakeholders who all have their own ideas about the best approach, the amount of participation, the intrinsic focus et cetera. Interests, the balance of power between actors and conflicts are always a factor when engaging in participation. Trust is easily lost and expectations are soon dashed. Every problem and the context of actors and factors surrounding it is unique and requires an individual approach, which is why it is not possible to produce a book of recipes for participation. It is true to say, however, that the quality of the process is always vital for its success. That is why the Guidance, and especially the Practice Guide, offer lots of tips for good process management.

Successful participation also requires an open attitude from project leaders and the organisation. They must be willing – and it also has to be possible – to make real use of the stakeholders' contributions. Furthermore, because participation is a time- and cost-intensive investment, it is essential to have the necessary resources. Do you have enough time to prepare and organise it properly, to process the results and to give feedback to the

participants?

Finally, to return to the essentials: a clear objective, good process management, an adequate range of resources and clear communication with stakeholders are vital for participation to be a success. The last factor, clear communication with stakeholders, is only possible, however, if you know what you want to achieve. In a word, do not just opt for participation without thinking it through.

Only do participation, if you know why you are doing it –and then communicate your ideas properly!

Example from practice

Participation in the Sustainability Outlook

Our aim in participating in the Sustainability Outlook (MNP 2004) was to find a good way to communicate the complex message simply and clearly. Our second aim was to get feedback on weak points in our argument and to trace any gaps in our thinking on sustainability.

In pursuit of these aims, we presented the Sustainability Outlook to various bodies and groups and discussed it with them. We also held workshops with a group of 'blue-sky thinkers' from industry and the universities. The participants were asked to elaborate on a picture of the future from the Sustainability Outlook and to apply the concept to policy choices in their own policy field.

We learned from the different forms of participation to present the Sustainability Outlook in such a way as to convey the message better and the audience were invited to reflect on their own policy field (or their own approach). We learned not to divulge our own view because this can inhibit the thinking process among the audience. We positioned the Sustainability Outlook as a way to initiate a shared thought process on different policy issues rather than aspiring to come up with clear, solid answers. That had been our earlier aim, but the process of seeking answers together was felt to produce paths to solutions which would enjoy far greater support.

In retrospect, it turned out that the publication of a single report can never be enough to hammer home the message (and the proposed method for seeking sustainability), even when it is accompanied by a large measure of participation. Aftercare in the application phase by, for instance, taking on the role of coach or mediator, and instructing more people in the organisation in the method are necessary for this.

(Rob Maas)

2 Why participation actually?

There are various aims and reasons for stakeholder participation and other forms of participation. In practice they often coincide. Aims or reasons for stakeholder participation can be divided into four main categories: quality aims, instrumental aims, democratic aims and emancipation aims. These categories are explained in turn below. In practice they often overlap and cannot easily be distinguished from each other. Not all of these aims are equally relevant to the work of the MNP, but they are described here because the complete spectrum allows their position to be better defined. Project leaders need to be aware of their own aims and priorities.

2.1 A wide choice of aims

Quality aims
Quality aims are concerned with improving the product itself. Knowledge which is not present in-house is brought in. This includes both scientific and non-scientific knowledge: knowledge about sectors and practices; monitoring of nature and the environment; the balance of power between actors; analyses of administrative processes; knowledge about policy implementation, desirable futures and anticipated developments. Many kinds of knowledge are involved therefore. Participation can be used to fill in gaps in knowledge or as external quality control on the organisation's 'own' knowledge. So participation can increase the validity of the knowledge products.

Instrumental aims
In the case of instrumental aims, the focus is not on the product itself but on the status of the product and therefore of the MNP. These aims are concerned with winning support for the product and strengthening the image of the MNP as an independent, quality-conscious knowledge provider. Another instrumental aim is the wider distribution of the content of a report in the hope that it will be used more widely in decision-making processes.

Democratic aims
Democratic aims are concerned with participation for its own sake. The consideration here is that stakeholders are entitled to participate in certain processes, to be informed and to make a contribution. For the MNP this can also be a reason for putting assumptions and analyses before the stakeholders or developing them together.

Emancipation aims
Emancipation aims assume that society benefits from participation: society is improved in some way (more sustainable, more just, economically more productive). Other aims of participation can be to stimulate change processes and reciprocal learning processes, to create networks of expertise and to support certain groups of stakeholders (empowerment). Emancipation aims overlap with democratic aims on this point. Research on managing transitions towards sustainability is an example of where emancipation aims could play a role for the MNP.

2.2 Participation and the MNP

Participation has a specific meaning for the MNP. The MNP is an organisation that gathers, interprets and produces knowledge. Its role is to support political decision-making but it is not itself actively involved in political decision-making.

The contribution that the MNP makes to scientific support for environmental and nature management policy demands the production of different kinds of knowledge: from theoretical and applied knowledge of the natural sciences, via knowledge about actual developments in the environmental sphere to knowledge about society. 'Knowledge about society' is a catch-all term for many different kinds of knowledge from various social science disciplines, knowledge about processes and how to manage them from policy studies to knowledge about human behaviour from social psychology.

Most employees of the Netherlands Environmental Assessment Agency have a background in the natural sciences. However, in their everyday work many are increasingly being faced with social-scientific issues, such as the influence of various factors on the effectiveness of policy (and how to measure this). Bodies like the MNP are expected to have more and more scientific disciplines in-house to enable them to analyse problems in their context, including social aspects and policy implications. Documents such as the Policy Evaluation Guide (forthcoming) and this Stakeholder Participation Guidance are the result.

The science of knowledge production

Thinking about how knowledge is produced and the best way to produce it has been the subject of much debate recently. Some have suggested that there is a dichotomy between the 'old' way of producing knowledge (mode I) and a new way (mode II), and that the latter is better suited to the demands of a changing society (the networking society) and its specific knowledge requirements (Nowotny, et al., 2001; Gibbons et al., 1994; Shinn, 2002).

Mode II is a more reflective approach to scholarly work, with constant interaction between theory and practice, between fundamental and applied knowledge, between various disciplines, and between scientists and non-scientists. It is not always clear whether the characterisation of mode II is a description of an actual change that has occurred or an appeal for such a change. Moreover, in practice forms of modes I and II exist alongside each other and mixed forms are also found.

Properties of knowledge production	
Mode I	***Mode II***
Disciplinary	Interdisciplinary, or even trans-disciplinary (involving non-scientists)
University-based	In various institutions, think tanks, consultancies
Homogeneous	Heterogeneous
Hierarchical	Horizontal
Theory-oriented	Application-oriented
Set procedures	Flexible and reflective
Classic peer review	New forms of quality control

Instead of the rather closed science in mode I, participation is an aspect of the 'new' way of producing knowledge à la mode II. By allowing stakeholders to take part in research, one is making use of the many sources of knowledge present in the community. In this way research is able to produce a more complete picture, that is close to practice and is application-oriented. Participation also operates in this scenario as a new form of quality control.

It has to be born in mind that this more complex way of producing knowledge is not always necessary or desirable. A participative approach is most appropriate for complex issues, while a disciplinary approach may be perfectly adequate for more straightforward matters (see also section 2.4 on complexity).

2.3 Stakeholders as knowledge producers

For the MNP as a knowledge producer, participation is a method of strengthening its knowledge base. The concept of 'knowledge' is being used here in the broadest sense of the word: it includes not only data, but also intuitive knowledge, knowledge about what is experienced as a problem and by whom, and creative knowledge about possible solutions.

In the process of knowledge production, there are various occasions when stakeholder participation can play a useful role for the MNP:

- gathering knowledge
- legitimising knowledge
- identifying and defining problems
- reflecting on knowledge
- distributing knowledge

Gathering knowledge is about bringing in knowledge that is not already present in-house. This may be (and usually is) scientific knowledge, but it can also be the knowledge of 'hands-on' experts, such as sector-specific knowledge or information from nature observations by volunteers. Another possible area is knowledge about values and about desirable or expected developments, which provide input to scenario development. Creative knowledge is very important here: having the ability and courage to think outside existing paths and expectations.

Legitimising knowledge is most important with 'new' problems or where there is a large degree of uncertainty. This is about involving other people (especially influential actors) in the formulation of research questions, assumptions, the research approach and conclusions, so that they enjoy more widespread support. Depending on the type of product, fellow scientists and/or influential people in society may be involved.

Identifying and defining problems is also a phase in which stakeholders can make a valuable contribution. After all, a problem is experienced and defined differently by people viewing it from different perspectives. Stakeholders, in other words people who are involved, may also identify incipient problems sooner than others, so participation can then also operate as an early warning system.

Reflecting on knowledge is another important function of participation for the MNP. Stakeholders can alert the MNP to gaps in its knowledge, and their questions can lead to an established approach being reviewed. Participation can in this way increase the learning capacity of the MNP.

Distributing knowledge is not an obvious reason for participation but it is a common one in practice. The MNP is required to be independent, but at the same time it is dependent on the extent to which its reports are read and their content appreciated. Increasing the involvement of stakeholders in the production of an MNP product gives it more publicity and so the content is likely to be better understood and passed on.

The idea that scientists and non-scientists alike have a valuable contribution to make has meanwhile come to be accepted by many; however, stakeholder participation is also seen as threatening. Some people have the impression that non-scientific statements are now just as valuable as scientific analyses. It should be clear though that the usefulness of stakeholder

participation in knowledge production is very dependent on context. To give an extreme example: it would not be very sensible to have stakeholder participation in theoretical physics. The interaction between people and the natural world is different, though each situation will have to be judged on its own merits to assess whether participation would useful or not.

There is another reason why participation may be difficult for the MNP. After all, most MNP employees have not been trained as experts in participation. That need not be a problem. Training is available to organise and facilitate these processes (see the Practice Guide). This Guidance sets out the factors to consider when deciding whether or not to organise participation and how to go about it.

To sum up: for the MNP participation is a means by which to produce high quality knowledge by identifying and framing research questions, collecting other perspectives and alternative knowledge, 'testing' and 'legitimising' conclusions and, partly through these processes, generating support for its reports.

Boundaries between science and policy

One reason why participation in the Netherlands Environmental Assessment Agency is not always welcomed is the Agency's position as intermediary between science and policy. The concept of 'boundary work' (Gieryn, 1983; Gibbons et al., 1994; Gieryn, 1995) helps us to understand why there has often been a power struggle over the role and position of the MNP. The concept suggests that the boundaries between science and non-science, in particular the boundary between science and policy, are not fixed, but are constantly being renegotiated. It is not therefore self-evident exactly what comes under 'science' and what comes under 'policy'. An example should make this clearer.

An MNP project leader wants to perform an ex-ante evaluation. This will involve discussing possible policy options with stakeholders. The commissioning organisation, a ministry, would prefer that the MNP did not talk to stakeholders because, it reasons, talking about policy options and the support for them is the politicians' job. In this example the two sides are drawing different boundaries between science and policy: what the MNP sees as knowledge production, the ministry regards as policy-making. The boundary between the two is not very easy to draw and so it has to be negotiated, which is what happens in practice. Another example of a 'boundary dispute' concerns whether or not it is the responsibility of the MNP to assess the effectiveness of policy. Environmental assessment agencies and environment ministries are debating these issues in almost all European countries.

The intermediary position of the MNP can also give rise to *internal* boundary disputes, as the rules of two different systems clash in an intermediary organisation, in this case the rules of the scientific system and the policy system. To give an example: several people are involved with all the products of the MNP; that includes its 'statutory duties', such as the Balances and Assessments. These publications only show the name of the MNP on the cover and give the name of the director (as the person with ultimate responsibility but not as the author) in the Foreword. In scientific publications, however, it is essential that the authors' names are stated, that is one of the rules of the scientific system. From a transparency perspective, it would be desirable that the authors of the Balances and Assessments also be stated, so that outsiders can see where the information came from and how it was produced. In this case the scientific convention of naming authors conflicts with the 'bureaucratic' norms of official final responsibility.

2.4 Complexity

The Guidance for Uncertainty Assessment and Communication (MNP/UU 2003) deals at length with the analysis of uncertainty. Here we will merely report briefly on how the complexity of a problem relates to the need for participation and the contribution it can make.

Hisschemöller and Hoppe (1996) classified policy problems with the aid of two axes. According to their model, a problem can be complex for two reasons: either because there is little information available or the available information is very uncertain; or because there is disagreement about the norms and values on which the problem is to be judged. If both of these circumstances are present, Hisschemöller and Hoppe describe this as an 'unstructured problem'.

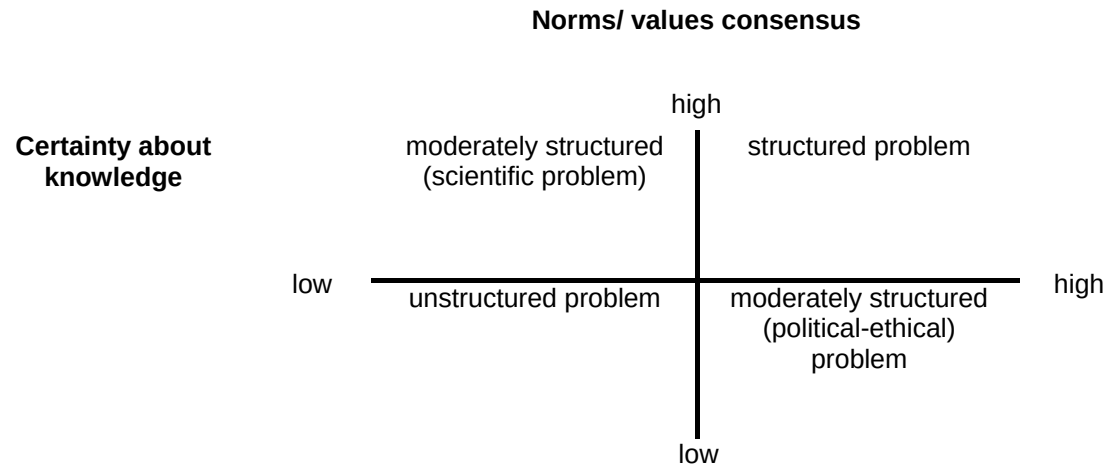

Figure 1 Types of policy problems (Hisschemöller and Hoppe, 1996)

This classification into four categories appears simple on paper. The top-right quadrant contains clear, mainly 'technical' problems; the top-left and bottom-right quadrants represent scientific and political-ethical problems; the really messy problems are in the bottom-left. However, assigning a problem to a quadrant is anything but simple, as people often cannot agree on which category 'their' problem belongs to. Politicians tend to estimate the knowledge base and norms and values consensus as higher than they actually are. Scientists, on the other hand, put more emphasis on gaps in knowledge and uncertainty, and often want to do more research.

The MNP, as an intermediary organisation between science and policy, has to make a judgment every time. All the same, the position that the MNP adopts will be disputed time and time again: by scientists who feel that it is irresponsible to make statements based on particular data, *and* by politicians who think that the MNP is encroaching upon their terrain when it concerns itself with the way knowledge is tied up with values.

It is nevertheless important for the MNP to choose to approach a problem in a particular way. The general rule is: if in doubt, the issue should be treated as an unstructured problem, and that includes the organisation of participation (see under 'Complexity and participation'). After all, an unstructured problem that is treated as a structured problem threatens to jeopardise the legitimacy of the MNP. It could create the perception that the MNP ignores certain perspectives or pushes them under the carpet.

Complexity and participation

Structured problem (e.g. ozone layer and CFCs)
If the necessary scientific knowledge is well established and there is also reasonable consensus about the norms and values at issue, there is little need for participation. Unfortunately this situation rarely occurs. It may be that we are sure about what knowledge is needed, but that knowledge may not be available. In that case participation can be used to gather information.

- Ask yourself whether participation is the most suitable approach. Bear in mind that stakeholder participation takes a lot of time and effort.
- Investigate whether the necessary knowledge cannot be gathered by other methods, such as research, and whether these other methods would produce better results.

Moderately structured scientific problem (e.g. problem of particulates in the air)
If there is no well-established knowledge (or there is uncertainty about what knowledge is needed), but there is a large measure of consensus on norms and values, knowledge production is the first priority. Participation can be an important resource here.

- Treat knowledge providers as your most important target group. These may be 'hands-on' experts and scientists.
- Ensure guaranteed quality of the science by including an extensive review phase in the project.
- Consult the MNP Guidance for Uncertainty Assessment and Communication.

Moderately structured ethical problem (e.g. maximum tolerable risk for carcinogenic substances)
If the necessary scientific knowledge is well established but there is not much consensus on norms and values, participation is extremely useful, but this raises the question of how the MNP can/should deal with these conflicting values, without risking being accused of taking on a political role.

- Formulate a clear position about the purpose and reasons for participation. Consult the commissioning body.
- Involve stakeholders at an early stage of the organisation and process of the participation.

Unstructured problem (e.g. climate change)
If there is little consensus about norms and values and there is no well-established knowledge (or there is uncertainty about what knowledge is needed), you are dealing with an unstructured problem. Participation is an important aid in this situation. Knowledge-gathering is closely linked with assumptions (including normative assumptions) in this case.

- Make the process as reflective as possible. Do that by alternating phases of research and phases of participation. Be clear about the role(s) of participation in the project.
- Involve as broad a spectrum of participants in the process as possible.
- Arrange professional guidance and make sure you have a good conflict management strategy.

2.5 Tensions and difficult choices

Precisely because participation has so many different aims, is used for so many different reasons, and can affect so many different phases, it tends to be accompanied in equal measure by tension, dilemmas and trade-off situations. The ideal process looks like this: everyone can and does take part; people work together harmoniously; organisers and participants keep to the rules of the game (which they have often chosen themselves); the process is open to all outcomes; it is efficient and effective; the results can be processed immediately and they fit in with the needs of the initiator.
In practice this ideal scenario rarely occurs. On the contrary, the organisation of participation comes up against a number of tricky questions and dilemmas which are difficult to resolve. The most important of these are summarised below.

Timing: early versus late
Using participation early in the process runs the risk that the process is still too open and vague. That makes the outcomes very unclear, while the issue is still not very high on the stakeholders' agenda. Stakeholders often only become motivated when something happens or threatens to happen that they do not like, if there is something at stake. The problem is that this often only becomes clear late in the process, when it is often too late to make much of a contribution. This can result in frustration and dissatisfaction.

Scope of the process: narrow versus broad
Inviting a broad range of stakeholders to participate and designing an open process seems an attractive option but may potentially lead to more conflict and less efficiency. Inviting a limited group, on the other hand, inclines toward exclusion and runs the risk of provoking protest. What is more, it may be rather ineffective, as you have to manage without the contributions of those who were not invited.

Flexible versus targeted process
An open reflective process allows room for discussion about preconditions, definitions of problems, agendas, procedural rules et cetera. However, the process also has to produce results that the MNP can use. Too much reflection and flexibility can result in inefficiency and participants becoming demotivated; a narrowly targeted process can lead to protest that the setup is too rigid or undemocratic and this also eats away at support.

Inequality versus empowerment
Some stakeholders inevitably have more means at their disposal (money, expertise and manpower) than others. Compare, for example an industrial umbrella organisation with a small environmental NGO. Participation can reinforce this inequality, because taking part in a participation process requires major investment and favours the stronger parties. However, trying to do something about this inequality through, for instance, financial compensation or other forms of empowerment, implies intervening in the balance of power – a role that the MNP perhaps does not aspire to – which can result in dissatisfaction among the stronger parties.

There are no ideal solutions to any of these dilemmas: the choices made will mainly depend on the aims and reasons for participation (section 2.1). After all, several aims often have to be weighed up against each other to achieve a certain balance. Democratic aims ('everyone can take part') may operate at the expense of quality aims ('will I manage to bring in relevant

perspectives?'). The choices made will also depend on the phases in which participation is used (section 2.3): knowledge-gathering probably requires different participants from knowledge distribution or problem identification. Whatever choice you make, think about the advantages *and* the unintended consequences. That is why it is so important to formulate clear aims, set priorities, and be conscious of trade-off situations.

Example from practice

Participation in the evaluation of uncertainty communication and worldviews

Two eye-catching products of the MNP are the Evironmental Balance and the Sustainabiltiy Outlook. The MNP was faced with a number of questions concerning the methodology and presentation of information in these reports. For the Environmental Balance the issue was the communication of uncertainties and for the Sustainability Outlook the issue was the use and interpretation of a set of four 'worldviews'.

To find answers to our questions we held several workshops in the Policy Lab of Utrecht University (projects contracted out to the Copernicus Institute). The policy lab is a meeting room with computers that run Group Decision Support software, which makes possible the structuring and facilitation of workshops. Different groups of participants were invited, such as scientists, students, policymakers, stakeholders from industry and NGOs and opinion leaders. Together with these people we assessed the current practice of uncertainty communication in the Environmental Balance and the use and interpretation of worldviews in the Sustainability Outlook. We gathered ideas on how these practices could be improved.

The participation delivered many useful views and new ideas. Both the organisers and the participants generally found it an interesting and instructive experience. Also the use of this kind of computer system was found nice and useful. For less 'popular' subjects such as uncertainty communication it turned to be difficult though to attract participants. The exercise costs quite an amount of time (half a day, excluding travel; time) and not everybody is willing to invest that time.

(Arjan Wardekker)

3 Participation becomes concrete: the project

The last chapter described the general aims and reasons for the MNP engaging in participation, as well as some of the issues and limitations involved. This chapter focuses on the project as point of departure for thinking about participation.

In practice people often proceed straight to considering the participation method, workshops for example, while the project leader and organisers have hardly thought about the content of the project, the knowledge required, the aims of participation et cetera. This Guidance deliberately deals with participation methods last, in chapter 5. Other choices come before the choice of a particular method: aims and reasons (last chapter), and the specific delineation of the project for which participation is being organised (this chapter).

Once the aims and reasons for participation are clear, the next question is which aspects of the project you want to deploy participation for and which you do not. This choice of specific aspects can result in your aims being adjusted, for instance, because you find out that participation in a particular area is not only worthwhile for recruiting support, but also contributes to knowledge production.

Once you are clear about the aims and the substance of your project, it is time to consider *who* are the best people to involve in pursuit of these aims (next chapter: the stakeholders).

However, the choice of a particular group of stakeholders can lead you to change an earlier choice about the content of the project, because, for instance, you expect the stakeholder group you have chosen will not be satisfied with the substance of the topic as defined.

This chapter focuses on the choice of project content. Two aspects are especially deserving of consideration for MNP products:

- the purpose of the assessment and the context of the project (political context, geographical and administrative scale, measure of freedom);
- the complexity (need for knowledge and social controversy).

3.1 The assessment in its political context

The scope and need for participation varies from project to project. Our own enquiries show that the further removed the assessment from daily political events at national level, the more freedom there is for stakeholder participation. 'Distancing from national politics' relates to the geographical and administrative scales as well as time. Participation in an international project about climate change is less charged for the MNP than an evaluation of new legislation on slurry. With international projects, there is more emphasis on research than on policy-making. These projects are often more concerned with scientific assessments, where the stakeholders' knowledge and the quality of their knowledge is more important than their political influence.

In practice, of course, many assessments are not really amenable to being classified very precisely. Nevertheless it is worth indicating what scope the Netherlands Environmental Assessment Agency has for participation for each type of assessment.

Ex post evaluation

An ex post evaluation focuses on existing policy that is already being implemented. The subject is usually very well defined and offers little scope for stakeholders to make a contribution. An ex postpolicy evaluation is often very one-sided politically, or principally a matter for Parliament.

Despite this the findings of the enquiries do directly affect the interests of various stakeholders, so the content of the assessment and the role of participation can be a source of conflict.

- ➢ Generate as much support as possible for the research by remembering to communicate clearly with stakeholders about the progress of the research, and presenting the research questions, methods and conclusions to them wherever possible.
- ➢ Use participation to fill in gaps in knowledge. Pay particular attention to the implementation and effects (intended and unintended) of the policy.

Ex ante evaluation

In the case of an ex ante evaluation, the scope for participation is highly dependent on how open the commissioning body's question is. Is it concerned with developing policy options? Participation is a particularly useful instrument for the *development* of policy options. Here too though the economic and political interests of stakeholders can impede an open search for

options.

- Use participation at the problem-definition stage and for gathering knowledge about practice and possible future developments.
- Take a close look at the scope or perspective of the research: what effects are included, what factors are being looked at? The focus determines the choice of stakeholders, but the choice of stakeholders also determines the focus.

Outlooks

Outlooks are concerned with matters which are relatively well distanced from day-to-day politics and their findings only have an indirect influence on short-term policy. They are also concerned about matters where there is a great deal of uncertainty, as they are looking to the future. Because of this, participation is an important component of Outlooks, as the use of diverse perspectives contributes to a more differentiated outlook on the future. Outlooks distinguish between policy scenarios and context scenarios, and develop the policy scenarios through logical steps to potential future policy.

This raises the question of whether consensus-forming on the desirability of certain developments should be part of the participation process. Consensus-forming contributes to support for the Outlook, but also implies the risk of the MNP taking on a political role – or at least threatens to provoke a debate about this.

- Use participation to gather knowledge about possible future developments and perhaps even to assess their desirability.
- Be clear about your own aims: do you just want to discuss different perspectives or do you also want to reach some degree of consensus about likely developments? Avoid any consensus which is at odds with the scientific independence of the MNP. Pay extra attention to process management.
- Create a project environment which allows scope for creativity. Invite outsiders and encourage free thinking outside the safe paths.

Expert assessments to produce a second opinion

Policy-makers may commission an second expert assessment if, for example, they do not agree with an earlier report. Assessments commissioned to give a second opinion are always in the political spotlight. Participation is one possible means to increase the legitimacy of alternative assessments, but they are often conducted in a conflict-laden atmosphere under great time pressure. These are difficult conditions for successful participation.

- Attract as broad a spectrum of stakeholders as possible into the process.
- Bring in external experts to organise the process, so as to prevent the MNP itself becoming the subject of political arguments.

Ad hoc opinions

An ad hoc opinion or quick scan is usually a rush job, so there is seldom time for organised participation, apart from informal contacts. Participation can still be an important source of knowledge for ad hoc opinions, but only if some preparatory work has been done.

- Create sustainable networks of actors and/or experts in good time, so that it is possible to organise some participation at short notice. Consider feedback groups, panels or internet forums that can be consultated at short notice.

Strategic research

The MNP also develops new methods and models for assessment purposes, or is involved in such developments at international level. Participation is crucially important here to find out what knowledge policy-makers need. What should a method or model be able to do? What questions should a model or method be able to answer?

- Involve not only fellow scientists but other groups. Ask potential users what questions the model should be able to answer.

3.2 Degrees of participation: ascending and descending the participation ladder

There are not only different forms of participation, there are also different degrees. How far participation can or should go is therefore a question that needs to be asked before questions about forms or methods. There are two aspects to this. First, what role, what importance is reserved for participation in the project? Second, how broad should the circle of participants be? This second question, about *who* should be involved, is looked at in chapter 4. This section focuses on the different degrees of participation.

Many debates have taken place in scientific, political and social circles about what 'real' participation is. For some, an information meeting about research findings counts as a form of participation, for others participation is only 'real' if stakeholders are actively involved in the analysis.

The image of the ladder has often been used in the professional literature to indicate degrees of participation (Arnstein 1969; Pröpper and Steenbeck 1999, Bogaert 2004). The ladder indicates the levels of ambition for participation from low to high. The ladder as applied to the role and practices of the Netherlands Environmental Assessment Agency is shown below.

The MNP can...

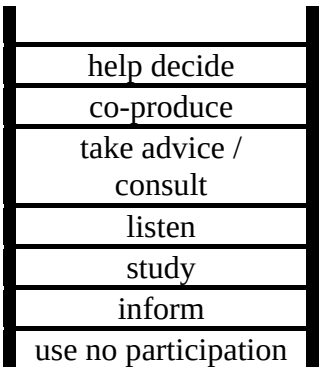

Figure 2 Participation ladder for the MNP

In the case of the Netherlands Environmental Assessment Agency, different degrees of participation may be appropriate depending on the aims, context of the problem and resources available. It is not a matter of 'the more participation, the better', as each form of participation has certain implications. These implications are more or less desirable and/or attainable, depending on the product and the context.

Which form or method of participation you choose depends on the role that you want participation to have in the project (chapter 2) and the degree of participation you opt for; in

other words, which rung on the participation ladder has your preference. Table 1 shows one or more forms of participation for each aspired level of participation on the participation ladder. For each rung of the ladder, for each aspired level therefore, the table shows what that level means for the direction of communication (one-way or two-way, indicated by arrows), which forms of participation can be considered, and the advantages and pitfalls associated with this.

The table distinguishes between an interactive and non-interactive approach. We have become aware that surveys of the views of stakeholders (‘What does the population think?’) are often considered to be participation, but they are not participation in the strict sense, because the element of interaction is absent. Surveys or group interviews are tried and tested methods of social science research which can produce very useful information and, depending on the objective of the research, may be preferable to interactive methods, but they are not participation. If all you want to do is canvass the views of stakeholders, a written survey may suffice, but co-production of knowledge requires more interactive elements or the use of participation methods.

Example from practice

Participation in the 'From purchasing to management' project

The Ministry of Agriculture, Nature and Food Quality commissioned the MNP to investigate the feasibility of a change of course in nature management policy: the Cabinet wanted to rely more heavily on farmers and other private individuals to implement nature conservation policy.

We were keen to sound out how far the research findings had been shared with stakeholders, because this issue was politically rather sensitive.

We took the draft results of our research to the various parties involved: ministries, nature conservation organisations, the LTO (Dutch Federation of Agricultural and Horticultural Organisations), farmers' organisations and the MNP themed working group Nature & Economy. We also organised a workshop with the parties involved, civil servants concerned with policy issues and researchers to highlight the conclusions and recommendations and draw up a research agenda.

The added value gained from the process from our perspective lay in increased support for and use of the research findings. The quality of the content also improved: the initial material was based on theoretical models. Later partly through the contribution made by stakeholders, there was more emphasis on practical aspects.

The participation process was very enjoyable and highly motivating because we were much closer to practice (instead of in our ivory towers) and it brought us into contact with the people who would have to do something with our research.
One striking aspect of the participation process was the openness of those giving presentations in their own fields. Many bilateral contacts were made. There were, however, clear differences between the attitudes adopted by different parties. Some felt they were under attack about the way they operated; others expressed their concerns about, for instance, nature or government finances; still others felt that they had been taken seriously at last for once.
The participation process was time-consuming, mainly as regards processing time. This did create capacity to do extra research along the way (practical data) but it would have been better to plan time for this before we started.

(Petra van Egmond)

Table 1 Implications of participation for the MNP

	Aspired level of participation	Direction of communication	Forms of participation	Advantages	Disadvantages/pitfalls
Interactive	Help decide	MNP ⟷ SH	• Not very common in practice • Examples: joint management of nature databases and participation in IPCC working groups • The main target group is fellow scientists	• Optimal use of participants' resources • Fulfils democratic motives	• In extreme cases the stakeholders determine the content of MNP reports • MNP risks losing control
	Co-produce	MNP ⟷ SH	• Interactive scenario-development • Alternation of research and participation; research-led participation process • Use of participatory methods (see Practice Guide)	• Increases commitment of participants • Reflective approach to co-production can make a major contribution to the production of knowledge • Ideally, generates support *and* produces knowledge	• Demands open-mindedness from the MNP • MNP has to commit to results to some extent, which is only possible if everyone is open to this • Intensive process • Participants' choice and quality of the facilitator are key factors for success
	Take advice Consult	MNP ⟵ SH	• Interactive workshops for: - defining the problem - research design - conclusions • Bilateral sessions • Review of project design and conclusions - written reports - workshops • Themed workshops for knowledge production	• Can result in new perspectives • Highly goal-oriented approach. Can be put into action at key moments in a project	• Less easy for the MNP to steer the process; process can produce unintended results • Stakeholders may disagree with the framing; can lead to unrest • Difficult to guarantee transparency
	Listen	MNP ⟵ SH	• Set up feedback channels • Keep an eye on the media • Receive complaints, protest and criticism	• MNP gets answers to questions it did not ask: prevents tunnel vision • MNP is able to draw attention to problems at an early stage	• Difficult to draw a line between where listening brings benefits and where it does not • Can be very time-consuming

Non-interactive	Study	MNP ⟵ SH	• Surveys • Interviews • Focus groups	• Large numbers of stakeholders can be reached with relatively little effort • Information can be collected in a very targeted way	• A strong framing effect may occur: other factors which were not asked about may be relevant
	Inform	MNP ⟶ SH	• Presentations	• Takes relatively little time and effort	• Can cause dissatisfaction among stakeholders • No opportunity to make a contribution, no 'real' participation
	Use no participation	MNP SH	None	• Project receives little attention. Under certain circumstances, this may be desirable	• No feedback, • No utilisation of external sources of information • No legitimisation

*SH = stakeholders

4 Stakeholders

The success of stakeholder participation is always dependent on the people involved: participants, organisers and facilitators. This chapter deals with potential participants. Human behaviour and the contributions people make cannot be predicted and always introduce an element of uncertainty. A participatory process can only be managed up to a point, as the interaction between participants and the process develops its own dynamics. It is even possible for a single participant to be responsible for the success or failure of a participation process.

All the same, not everything is down to chance. Choosing the right people is an important determinant of the process, so it is vital to have a close look at the stakeholders when choosing the right participants. However, the desired process is also a determining factor in the choice of stakeholders.

It is not always necessary to perform an extensive stakeholder analysis as a basis for the selection of participants. This is recommended, however, if scientific and social controversy is running high and there are major interests at stake.

The remaining sections of this chapter describe general considerations for stakeholder participation. Methods of selecting stakeholders can be found in the Practice Guide.

4.1 Choice of stakeholders

'How do I choose the right stakeholders to involve in an MNP project?' In order to answer this question, you must first of all be clear about what can and will actually be expected of the stakeholders.

What is expected partly depends on the purpose of the participation (chapter 2). Is it to gather knowledge, generate support, or does it have a different purpose? The answers to these questions will also affect the choice of stakeholders.

The principal criteria for the choice of stakeholders who will influence the course of a participation process are:

- extent of stakeholders' influence on the political debate
- level of stakeholders' knowledge
- multiformity of perspectives
- enthusiasm
- communicative skills
- how well they know each other
- integrity.

Influential stakeholders are important if the purpose of the exercise is to generate support but not if the purpose is to obtain knowledge. It can even be counterproductive if influential representatives of certain groups take part in a participation process where they are asked to contribute their knowledge. First, because they themselves cannot see how participation is serving a concrete useful purpose and they soon come to feel that they are wasting their time. Second, because conflicts or coalitions among the stakeholders can interfere with the participation process, making candid communication impossible. Third, because the most influential stakeholders are not necessarily the people with the best knowledge of the issues.

Choosing from among the 'second rank' may therefore be the best option in some cases.

For Outlooks and when developing policy options, it is best to choose participants who do not know each other very well, because this encourages a certain openness in the process. However, for an evaluation of national policy, where the aim is to generate support for the evaluation, it is important to include influential stakeholders.

4.2 The question of representation: to invite or not to invite?

The idea that the participants in a participation process should be representative (of the community or part of the community) is widespread. It builds on the idea that participation should contribute to the further democratisation of society. However, representativeness is by no means important for all issues and objectives, and in some situations representativeness is not important at all. Besides, the question is, what should be represented: the citizens, the knowledge, civil society, different perspectives, or a combination of these? Two criteria are important from the perspective of knowledge production: the quality of the knowledge that a particular stakeholder can contribute, and the representation of as many perspectives as possible. Both are difficult to judge in advance.

In addition to this, it is not always equally clear who is being represented by whom. Social organisations at best only have a very indirect mandate from the population or their own supporters. This is not to deny that they can make a legitimate contribution. Nor are sector associations and umbrella organisations always the best representatives. Sometimes umbrella organisations only represent a small common interest (a small company can have completely different interests from a large multinational in the same sector). Some sector associations also have limited influence and the major players are the ones who really determine what happens. Representativeness is a noble aim, therefore, but it is difficult to achieve in practice and often not very relevant. Other qualities and expectations of participants are frequently of overriding importance (see 'The ideal participant...').

The ideal participant in the process

- is enthusiastic and keen to come
- can contribute something new
- has knowledge of the issues
- can pursuade his/her supporters
- can express him/herself well
- has influence

A fictitious example may help you to weigh the pros and cons of whether to invite a group or not. Suppose that the MNP organises a participation process about the effects of particulates in the air on human health. A pressure group XY, which is warning of the dangers, has gathered data and reports showing the harmfulness of particulates. However, the MNP considers this evidence to be unscientific. What is more, the group is creating social unrest, via the press, and against the MNP. Should this group be invited to take part in a stakeholder participation process or not? Table 2 presents some arguments for and against.

Table 2 Arguments for inviting or not inviting the group

Arguments for *inviting* the group	**Arguments for *not inviting* the group**
- XY may have more knowledge to contribute than MNP thinks. - Even if the knowledge that XY has is dubious, the group represents an important popular movement and so has the right to be heard. - If this kind of pressure group is excluded from the process, it may do even more harm.	- XY has little to contribute to the aim of the participation process (knowledge-gathering), so its participation would not be effective. - XY has its own agenda, it is not representing anyone. - XY would disrupt the group process with its hostile attitude and make open communication difficult.

These arguments for and against make clear that there is no general answer to the question as to what would be the best course of action in this case. Careful weighing up of the pros and cons could produce different answers depending on the context. If in doubt, the golden rule is: better one stakeholder too many than one too few, because a stakeholder who feels excluded, can instigate a debate which (rightly or wrongly) throws doubt on the legitimacy of the assessment. It is true that one can argue that the trust that is essential for a participation process to be successful is easier for project leaders to create without the presence of a 'disruptive element', but by doing this they would create more distrust among those who are excluded from the process. Sometimes the solution can be found at a personal level in this kind of situation: by inviting another person from the organisation in question or by opening up informal contacts through other employees.

It is imperative that those who are invited to take part have integrity. If you get a strong impression that a stakeholder is not acting with integrity, it would be best not to invite that person. If it is impossible to avoid inviting him or her, however, it would be advisable to try to make personal contact, in an attempt to remove the suspicion on one or both sides. If this is not possible and you come to the conclusion that the person nevertheless has to be invited, seek professional advice and engage professional support for the process.

4.3 What do stakeholders expect?

A well-known problem with participation is people not showing up or dropping out of the process along the way. This is a frequent cause of frustration among organisers. There are a number of reasons why participants stay away. First, participants may lack motivation from the beginning or they may gradually become less motivated. Second, a participant may be struggling with a shortage of time. Third, lack of personal, financial or other resources may be a problem. In each of these cases it is important to be aware of the participants' expectations and interests: how are they benefiting from the process? Whatever the problem, it is important to show them that something has been achieved relatively quickly in the process. Participants invest time and effort in participation and they do not do that for no reason. They have certain expectations about their participation and want to see them met, for example:

- to exercise influence
- to see their contribution in the end product
- to contribute expertise and share it with others
- to put their own organisation in a favourable light
- to acquire knowledge, learn something

- to network, meet friends
- to enjoy themselves.

However, they may sometimes also be motivated to:

- delay a process, sabotage it or spy on it
- have a platform for self-presentation.

It is important to ask yourself how far the planned participation can and will meet these expectations, and then to consider whether the benefit to the stakeholders is in proportion to the effort they are expected to put into the process. What can the MNP promise them, what can it not? What expectations can the project fulfil? Make sure that the participants have a clear picture of what is expected of them in advance. What will the outcomes be and who decides on this? What has already been decided and what is still open to discussion? The mere fact that something is being organised creates certain expectations in the minds of participants. Try to find out what these expectations are and respond to them. You could use a form of words something like this: 'We are not going to adopt the advice of the working group outright, but you will clearly be able to see the advice of the working group in the final report, and participants will be given a further opportunity to comment prior to publication.'

Being able to exert an influence is an important motive for participants, of course, but rational motives are not the only motives involved. Participants want to feel valued, to feel that they can contribute something, but they also come because they find the experience rewarding and to meet friends and acquaintances. A good venue, a good programme and something nice to eat and drink can have a very positive effect. Taking care of these aspects conveys the message that: 'your presence is important to us and we appreciate the fact that you have come.'

One difficult issue is how project leaders can and should deal with participants whose intentions are not constructive. What should you do if stakeholders deliberately disrupt the process because they can see that the outcome of an assessment will turn out to be against their interests? Always try to anticipate this by, for instance, building up good contacts with these stakeholders beforehand, so that you get a sense of the attitudes they are likely to adopt during the process. If you are depending on information which only these stakeholders have, then you are in a very difficult position. In that case, an open group process would not be an obvious choice and you should seriously consider whether participation is a good option.

4.4 Position of the commissioning body

The degree of freedom that project leaders have to organise participation also depends on the position of the commissioning body and the scope it allows for participation. Commissioning clients of the MNP (usually ministries) are not all-out enthusiasts. Some commissioning bodies feel that contact with stakeholders belongs to the political sphere and they see participation as meddling in political processes and, therefore, as the MNP exceeding its role and authority (see 'Boundaries between science and policy' on page 16). For this reason, it is important to communicate clearly with the commissioning body about the purpose of and need for stakeholder participation. The purpose of such communication is firstly to make clear to the commissioning body why stakeholder participation is being used and what benefits it will bring, and secondly to include the viewpoint of the commissioning body in the planning of the stakeholder participation.

Example from practice

Participation in the production of IPCC reports

The MNP has been running the Technical Support Unit (TSU) for working group III of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) for years. A large measure of participation goes into the production of all IPCC reports.

First of all, the teams that write the IPCC reports are composed to include a diversity of approaches to the content and geographical spread.

Second, all stakeholders can take part in the expert reviews of draft reports (level of participation: consult; low level of interactivity) and the TSU tries to have as large as possible a range of expertise among the reviewers. National delegations enjoy a higher level of participation, as they help to decide on the actual text of the summaries for policy-makers. This is done in the plenary sessions where the reports are finalised. The IPCC is an intergovernmental body of the UN which in principle takes decisions on the basis of consensus between countries. Science still manages to preserve its integrity in this process, because the management of the IPCC is largely made up of scientists, and first authors have the right to veto changes to the summaries if these changes do not agree with the underlying report.

This procedure does not fundamentally change the substantive tenor of the summary. Some conclusions may be given more or less emphasis. In all cases a scientifically sound summary is produced. The main purpose of this process is to make governments co-owners of the IPCC reports and in so doing to generate maximum support for the reports. As a result of this, the science is hardly a matter for debate any more in the climate convention.

(Arthur Petersen)

5 Participation takes shape

This chapter looks at forms of participation, though it only gives a brief summary of methods. Methods and process management are covered at length in the Practice Guide. Whatever method you choose, a participation process stands or falls on good process management.

In its day-to-day operations the MNP rarely sets up large-scale participation projects. Project leaders are more likely to opt for workshops and other small-scale events. This Guidance therefore distinguishes between two groups of methods: forms of participation for 'everyday' and participation methods for projects where participation is a core component.

5.1 Forms of participation for 'everyday'

There are many possible forms: round table discussion, various types of workshops such as themed workshops and scenario workshops, information markets, interviews, presentations et cetera. Table 1 summarises various forms of participation which fit each rung of the participation ladder.

There are all kinds of facilitation techniques for guiding group processes which are very useful for participation meetings. They are taken from the toolbox of professional group counselling and process support (moderation) and mostly originated in the worlds of industry and education (in particular adult education). Consider, for example, written discussion, mind-mapping, brainstorming and so on. Almost everyone has at some time worked with post-it notes and flash cards. A workshop or meeting structured in this way may be called a *facilitated workshop* or *moderated workshop* and is an interactive form of process support. It is a collection of techniques that can be used at different stages of a process in order to serve a particular purpose at each stage, such as: defining a problem, generating ideas and solutions or reflecting on them, choosing options et cetera. They are techniques which aim to stimulate creativity, but also to allow everyone's voice to be heard and to clarify the different positions. Discussion is generally in writing, using all kinds of cards and letters (this may be the only form, the main form or the form used in an initial phase). The advantage of this is that those who would not otherwise have said anything can make a contribution, while those who have a lot to say for themselves can be restrained. These techniques are therefore more suitable than face-to-face discussions for guiding group processes along the right tracks. Who has not come across the individual with strong views who can dominate a whole meeting or cause the conflict to snowball? With this approach (and a good facilitator) that is less likely to happen.

Some techniques are very simple and are also suitable for use on a small scale. Others require some experience. It is possible to gain this experience on 'safe' territory: using moderation techniques to lead an internal MNP meeting for instance. These techniques are described at length in the Practice Guide.

5.2 Participation methods

The literature on participation is full of methods with colourful names like 'future search conference', 'planning cells', 'round tables' et cetera. Most of these methods originate from a particular field, such as local planning or development cooperation. Some of these methods are already widely used in practice, while others remain paper tigers. The extent to which a

method is tried and tested and has been found to be robust and the experience of the process supervisor both play a decisive role in the choice of one or more methods.

The Practice Guide presents a number of these methods, with particular focus on their usefulness to the MNP, as many participation methods incorporate a strong element of decision-making (especially local decision-making), an approach which is not really suitable for the MNP. The methods selected concentrate more on the acquisition of knowledge and advising on possible policy options. The purpose of the selection is to show what is possible. It does not rule out the possibility of other methods.

5.3 In-house or outsourcing?

If you plan to do a lot of participation or you are dealing with a complex, let alone a conflict-ridden situation, it would be sensible, even if it is not necessary, to engage professional process support from outside. These professionals can look at the available options with you, help you to formulate goals, and support and supervise the process. As well as benefiting from their professional advice, you get an additional advantage in that they can also function as a neutral intermediary, where there are a lot of problems or conflicts or where problems or conflicts are anticipated. Try to separate the process from the content; one way to do this is to hire in an external facilitator.

The project budget does not always allow funds to be spent on outsourcing participation skills, especially in the case of short-term projects, where participation is just one small aspect. It can still be useful to ask for advice in that case: the stakeholders may well have far more to offer than you first thought. However, you may decide to organise something yourself. Perhaps you have a colleague who has more experience in this area or the Information Services and Methodology (IMP) team can help.

More information on methods and techniques for participation can be found in the Practice Guide. This addresses questions such as ‘What methods are suitable for which purposes?’ and ‘What does good process management involve?’ in detail.

Example from practice

Participation in the Evaluation of the Fertilisers Act (MNP 2004)

As part of the Evaluation of the Fertilisers Act 2004, we the MNP organised two meetings with a sounding board. The purpose of the meetings was to inform the organised interest group about the design and draft findings of the evaluation study before it was published. We wanted to test whether the design matched the issues that were important to various interest groups, and whether the conclusions had come across well. The sounding board meetings also had a participatory function therefore. Around 50 representatives from agricultural organisations, pressure groups for nature and recreational interests, agro-industry, Rabobank, regional authorities and practical research were invited to the sounding board meetings, at which presentations were given and relevant issues were discussed.

The meetings gave us particular insight into how the legislation on fertilisers works in practice and into grassroots support for the policy, especially among farmers. The discussions among the farmers themselves and between nature conservation organisations and farmers were the most interesting and instructive. There was a lot of discussion about the legitimacy of the policy. A substantial proportion of the agricultural community still deny the environmental problems that the policy and research link to the slurry problem, while others are actively and constructively thinking about smart measures and ways to improve the policy. Gaining an understanding of the support for regulations and how they are perceived, and of the effects on the environment ascribed to agriculture, helped us to formulate the conclusions of our evaluation better, in a way that made them also accessible to people outside the world of policy-making.

A further benefit that we gained from the sounding board meetings was the interaction with the network. You regularly come across many of the participants from the sounding board in the agricultural press and at meetings organised by other organisations.

(Hans van Grinsven)

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