

Editorial

Broadening democracy in environmental policy processes

Introduction

There has been a growing awareness over the last decade of the need for new institutional arrangements to address the theoretical and practical challenges of environmental management. Mainstream economic approaches advocate formal procedures based upon free-market political structures while participatory decision processes are advanced as being more contextual and sensitive to multiple and incommensurable values. A variety of institutions and organisations have supported calls for greater public participation in environmental policy from the Aarhus Convention (European Commission, 1998) to the World Bank's inclusion of multiple and nongovernment stakeholders in project appraisal. However, research into the operational criteria for effective public participation is at an early stage of development.

As the papers in this theme issue show, there are significant gains to be made by further use of participatory approaches in environmental management, but maintaining the interest, involvement, and commitment of civil society may prove a major challenge. Enthusiasm for new approaches needs to be qualified by awareness of the difficulties in applying techniques in different contexts and their potential for both failure and manipulation. At the same time, consumer boycotts and support for nonviolent direct action (for example, antiroad demonstrations) do indicate public dissatisfaction with current institutions and a demand for greater say in policy, as opposed to an infrequent vote for a possible representative.

The concern for the political legitimacy of government policy is particularly relevant in societies with low voter turnout or where systems fail to represent minority parties. Both the United Kingdom and the USA have systems which increasingly seem inadequate as far as voters are concerned. This general problem takes on specific significance in the formation of environmental policy where the directly concerned political parties are small and lack representation via established institutions. Thus, for example, under the UK parliamentary system, which has no proportional representation, a substantial minority of votes for the Green Party has in the past been unable to gain even one member in parliament.

Various features of representative democracy are raised by O'Neill. In particular, environmental policy brings to the fore the question of representation for the silent voices of nonhumans and future generations. Another aspect of representation is how information is delivered through the interaction of science and policy. The role of expert and 'objective' scientific information to inform policy on uncertain and complex environmental problems has been brought into question on issues ranging from nuclear power to genetically modified crops. That there is a problem with the traditional approach to environmental policy processes is apparent from the greater attention given in recent years to a range of alternative institutional approaches (Royal Commission on Environmental Pollution, 1998). However, although several techniques have been increasingly deployed they also have their own limitations. The use of focus groups in the United Kingdom was seen as providing some additional legitimacy for policy, although now such an approach often receives popular derision as a marketing technique which has been overused. Consensus conferences have been employed in several European countries, but consensus is itself a questionable goal when facing

fundamental differences in perspectives and values. As Bloomfield et al point out, there are problems with closing down a debate in an effort to achieve an artificially stable outcome described as consensus. Instead, there is a need for mapping out the contours of the debate via an approach such as that suggested by Stirling and Mayer.

The use of 'stakeholders' to represent vested interests directly in decision process has entered into both policy and research with the emphasis on addressing the needs of 'end-users'. In this issue, Beierle and Konisky report on experience in North America of using stakeholder committees. Both citizens' juries and the appeal to vested interests raise similar questions as to who should be represented and how they should be represented. Citizens' juries have become more common as well as being an increasing focus of research, as discussed by Kenyon et al. Economists have also become increasingly concerned to employ such approaches to increase the legitimacy of their valuation work. Niemeyer and Spash point out how this is leading to a range of techniques which can be summarised as deliberative monetary valuation.

At a time when political protests are arising over globalisation and traditional political processes seem inadequate for addressing environmental problems, or related food-safety issues, a theme issue on the subject of public participation in environmental policy formation seems particularly appropriate. In fact, this issue arises from a couple of different sources. The first is represented by the papers by Bloomfield et al and O'Neill. In earlier forms these were presented as part of an ESRC funded workshop series on deliberative inclusive processes organised by John O'Neill, Jacqui Burgess, and Tim O'Riordan. A second key source of inspiration for the theme issue was the European Commission funded Concerted Action on Environmental Valuation in Europe (EVE), ENV4-CT97-0558, which ran a series of nine workshops on various themes including participatory approaches to environmental policy (Spash, 2000). A series of eleven policy briefs was produced, including one arising from the workshop on participation (De Marchi and Ravetz, 2001). Several of the issues raised in this theme issue therefore reflect an ongoing research agenda.

Overview

As suggested above, a major concern in the application of policy must be the extent to which instruments and prescriptions are regarded as legitimate. Economic prescriptions tend to rely upon expert accreditation and statistical representation. Problems can then arise when experts are too narrowly focused upon a specific goal (for example, efficiency), substantive minority concerns arise, or politically important positions are neglected because the empirical methodology assumes that relevant factors can be measured. Thus, a cost-benefit analysis may show statistically significant numbers for the monetary value of an environmental entity while failing to represent concerns over the rights of the entity, justice, or incommensurable values. Tradable permits may be promoted by experts as an efficient solution to air pollution without reflecting upon the distribution of power. Power is relevant both *ex ante* within systems (for example, the dominance of oligopolistic production) and *ex post* where such tools themselves change the distribution of power and legitimate the actions of specific groups (for example, pollution of others becoming a legitimate market item to be traded). These issues of representation are equally relevant for political processes of deliberation.

Thus, O'Neill's paper opens this theme issue with a discussion which gets to the heart of the matter: namely, what is the meaning of representation? More specifically we should be aware of the different types of representation, and therefore legitimacy, which exist amongst economic and political approaches. The provision of perfect representation by institutions and processes is seen to be an illusive and meaningless goal. Instead, those claiming to represent others must rely upon various forms of

legitimation which can be challenged. Authorisation and accountability are important sources of legitimation within representative democracy. Various groups may lack representation or be poorly represented but could achieve adequate representation through lobbying for institutional reform. A fundamental concern for environmental policy is then the representation in economic and political processes of silent parties, such as future generations and nonhuman species, which may have neither voice nor presence.

Deliberation has been proposed as a method for addressing such problems. Thus, a process of deliberation may be argued to reveal the concerns of others via reflection upon their situation, for example, what happens to a species when a road destroys its habitat. However, deliberation operates most effectively with small groups, whereas participation by large numbers is taken to supply representation of public opinion. There can also be problems within deliberation where views fail to be expressed for various reasons, as discussed by Kenyon et al in this issue. Hence a parallel has been drawn between a willingness-to-say problem under deliberative institutions, because of unequal skills in articulation, and the willingness-to-pay problems under cost–benefit analysis, because of unequal income distribution. However, O’Neill differentiates the concerns of political scientists over representation from those of other social scientists. For the former the aim is to allow for the expression of legitimate views whereas the aim for the latter is prediction and explanation.

Developing the meaning of representation in the political context means differentiating between those outside an existing group who express solidarity (for example, a man supporting feminism) and those who are assumed to be representative of a group (for example, a woman writing on feminist issues). The latter can gain legitimacy through authorisation by a group and being held accountable to them. This is impossible for future generations and nonhuman species. Thus, O’Neill argues that their voice must be expressed by solidarity and making epistemic claims of legitimacy. Epistemic claims, which allow someone to speak on behalf of others, include knowledge, expertise, and judgment.

Bloomfield et al share several of the concerns raised by O’Neill concerning deliberative institutions while exploring the experience with their use in the United Kingdom. One such point is the emphasis placed upon convergence of opinions or judgments as a sign of successful deliberation. However, environmental problems involve incompatible conflicts of interest, where we

hard choices between contingent and conflicting values can be unavoidable, and consensus can be a sign of power being used to silence debate. Thus Bloomfield et al warn of consensus creating a false sense of closure and the illusion of stability.

Deliberative institutions need to be set within the context of other environmental policy processes and institutions. This means changing the operation of current systems of governance to allow for the role of new institutions such as citizens’ juries so that their recommendations are ‘plugged in’ to the policy process. A comprehensive renewal of democratic process is then called for, in contrast to merely adding some deliberative institutions to existing and unchanged systems. Indeed, the result of doing the latter could be to worsen the, already declining, extent of public participation through disillusion with the systems of governance which are viewed as ignoring considered opinion. In the United Kingdom, participation in local government has been restricted by legislation defining those issues permitted to go for public consultation, and the wide range of issues regarded as nonnegotiable. Bloomfield et al also argue that central government under the Labour Party has been unclear about how increased civic engagement should develop in the context of local institutions of governance and has been concerned to maintain control over decisions. One aspect of the way forward is a

call for empirical research into the context within which deliberative and inclusive processes can operate effectively; how they should be designed, run, and evaluated; and what can be expected from such processes.

Along the lines of this request for research the paper by Beierle and Konisky reports upon experience with stakeholder involvement in managing pollution of the Great Lakes. Stakeholder committees, set up to advise on pollution remediation, met regularly, usually over several years. The authors concentrate upon the stakeholder committee role in defining and describing the problem prior to implementation of the management plan. Implementation is expected to be a more contentious phase. Issues of representation again arise early in the discussion, with the recognition that members of the public may identify with several positions held by different stakeholders or none. Those without any specific affiliation to an interest group are regarded as representing an 'average' member of the public. The aim of such advisory committees is described as being to achieve adequate and fair representation of various interests.

Beierle and Konisky undertook an institutional analysis of the stakeholder process in the Great Lakes in order to assess the success in terms of improving the quality of decisions, relationships among participants, management of the environment, and environmental quality. The process was found to have successfully introduced 'public values' into the decision process, although the authors question how representative were members of the committees in terms of general public opinion. In terms of concerns that nonexpert involvement might reduce scientific and technical quality, the authors found evidence to the contrary. That is, stakeholders introduced additional information and local knowledge, while also themselves becoming more highly educated. A dichotomy between scientists providing facts and the lay public values is therefore inappropriate as participants were able to roll up their collective sleeves and take part in the technical aspects of decisionmaking. Additional encouragement for supporters of participatory processes comes from the positive findings with regard to reduced conflict between stakeholders as a result of working together on the committees. This is particularly welcome in the USA where resort to lengthy litigation is a common conflict resolution technique and citizens' trust in government is at an "all-time low". However, some potential participants were worried about loss of power held via traditional planning and legal routes and did boycott the stakeholder committees. Also the extent to which trust in government agencies was improved seemed limited.

Overall, the stakeholder process seems to have had many positive outcomes for those involved. However, in terms of implementation of pollution clean-up the result is unclear, with good participatory processes being poorly correlated with implementation to date. Communication and involvement of the wider public also seemed poor. A major concern is therefore that the link between such processes and substantive environmental improvement be explored further. In particular, the authors identify an area for future research as being the incentives of various actors to exert influence outside of the participatory process.

Stirling and Mayer offer a novel approach to preference mapping, which might help achieve such understanding. In an application to the introduction of genetically modified crops in the United Kingdom they show how different values relating to policy proposals can be mapped out. The mapping approach employs techniques from multi-criteria analysis to explore with interviewees their classification and weighting of policy options. Although the method is relatively simple, a rich array of information on and insight into the problem result. Clearly identifiable are divisions of opinion over the importance of health, environmental, and economic impacts. However, the authors

note the complexity of reasons underlying responses and caution against simplistic extrapolation of their current results. One hope for this multicriteria mapping approach is that areas of conflict and uncertainty might be identified and associated with different vested interests. This would allow some explanation of attitudes towards different policies.

At the same time, the complexity of answers might be explored by combining the mapping approach with a process of formal deliberation. A formal structure might be built into a stakeholder process by combining group discussion with multicriteria mapping. That is, Stirling and Mayer have selected vested interests in the genetically modified crop debate for their analysis but without those individuals meeting or interacting. They note the difficulties faced by individuals in scoring different policy options and the need for discussion and elaboration of definitions on the part of the participants. An opportunity to explore these issues in a group might clarify meanings and positions. Such institutional design is one of the interesting possibilities offered by the current research in this area.

The possibility of employing deliberative processes has also begun to appear in the context of economic valuation but more as an attempt to rectify known problems. This interaction between economics and deliberative processes is explored in the last two papers of this theme issue. Kenyon et al consider the role of citizens' juries as a possible complement to monetary valuation. They outline possible advantages as being improved understanding by participants, allowing the role of individuals as political actors to be emphasised, provision of insight into value formation, and ability to address sustainability directly. Two case studies employing a citizens' jury are reported, both conducted in Scotland.

Issues of participant selection and representation again arise early in the process. The first case study selected participants from a contingent valuation survey whereas the second aimed for a more random selection from those on the electoral register. In both cases the analyst makes a decision over participation and the criterion for what makes an individual 'representative'. Representation here diverges from the requirements for legitimacy discussed by O'Neill and is more concerned with loosely representing a range of socioeconomic characteristics. The participants are drawn from a subsample who have already self-selected on the basis of their interest in being a participant.

Another issue concerns the expected outcome of the process. In the Kenyon et al work the expectation was clearly that a consensus report should be produced. As the authors state in the second study, where consensus proved impossible they resorted to majority voting. Clearly, adopting such an approach risks discouraging divergent opinions and losing the possibility for explaining dissent.

In terms of the possibilities provided by citizens' juries for exploring value formation the fact that participants could make priorities and explain their reasoning is encouraging. This would seem to support the suggestion above for combining multicriteria mapping with group deliberation. Kenyon et al also note the importance of community values but that this would normally be neglected under a cost-benefit analysis. Rather than the dichotomy between political and economic or citizen and consumer, which the authors emphasise, this finding indicates mixed motives including social norms as well as individual preferences.

Overall, Kenyon et al are very positive about the possibilities for citizens' juries while wanting to maintain economic valuation methods, and indeed describing the two approaches as complementary. This raises questions over the extent to which the same environmental policy issue might be addressed by each approach or by a synthesis. The final paper in this theme issue explores the differences between economic valuation and public deliberation. Deliberative tools have been introduced informally

into cost–benefit analysis in a variety of forms. A more formal process which produces monetary valuation as part of public deliberation over an environmental change is also emerging. This raises a new set of concerns over the aims of deliberative processes within policy.

Research projects aimed at exploring the use of citizens' juries for promoting contingent valuation have proven difficult because of the divergent characteristics of the two approaches. Thus, the Ely citizens' jury conducted by Aldred and Jacobs (1997) was initially meant to include a contingent valuation study by myself (Spash, 1998), but this proved too removed from the deliberative process to be practicable. O'Neill and I then explored reasons for divergence between citizens' juries and contingent valuation and have attempted to place the different tools in some context relative to the value concepts they address (O'Neill and Spash, 2000). In this issue Niemeyer and I try to take this further and contrast the features of cost–benefit analysis and public deliberation in order to show what can realistically be expected of a formally combined approach termed deliberative monetary valuation (DMV). There has been interest in developing such an approach in Australia and the United Kingdom. Although there may be a role for DMV, the extent of practical applications is undoubtedly limited, the theoretical basis uncertain, and the exact role is at present unclear.

Conclusions

In discussing this theme issue some expressed scepticism that deliberative processes have developed far enough to merit such attention. This collection of papers shows a broad range of active and ongoing research on the subject as well as interest from a variety of disciplines. Participatory approaches to environmental policy clearly provide opportunities for constructive and cooperative dialogue. Although the recent trend calling for such approaches is new, some of the problems, such as representation, have been discussed since the ancient Greeks. The design of participatory approaches is emerging through a debate over the strengths and weaknesses of alternative democratic institutions, a debate to which this theme issue adds.

Some emerging principles of participatory approaches can be identified. A broad framing is required which allows for the inclusion of local knowledge and concerns. Scientific information must be assessed in terms of quality, relevance, and limitations while other information is included such as community values, social norms, and ethical beliefs. The conduct of a participatory process must be carefully specified in terms of purpose, representative characteristics of participants, procedural rules including treatment of dissent, expected outcomes, and quality assurance (De Marchi and Ravetz, 2001). The outcomes of the process must be connected to the institutional context of the problem, and recommendations must form part of the policy process rather than merely being filed away. The latter scenario will merely add to distrust.

At a time when public participation in formal procedures of governance is declining and civil disturbance, over environmental issues, and technological and social change, is front-page news there is a need to go beyond justifying policies solely upon expert knowledge and claims of objectivity and certainty. Although a variety of participatory methods have been developed, and only a few are directly discussed in this issue, they share a concern for applying discursive reasoning as opposed to scientific rationalism. Arguments and policies are seen as requiring evaluation and debate in open dialogue rather than being deduced as logical outcomes from a set of given premises. There are already clear advantages in terms of framing policy issues more broadly, being able to include a variety of information, and making decision processes more open and inclusive.

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