

PUBLIC PARTICIPATION AND THE GOVERNANCE OF INNOVATION: EVALUATION OF PROCEDURES FOR CITIZENS INVOLVEMENT

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Abstract

Techno-scientific innovations with an impact on the lives of citizens are increasingly at the centre of strong debates. One of the main challenges at all policy levels seems to be finding innovative ways to couple the increasing need to take decisions on complex, techno-scientific issues with democratic representation and citizens involvement.

The aim of the PPGI Project, promoted by the Italian Lombardia Region together with the Bassetti Foundation in collaboration with Observa has been to test out - for the very first time in Italy - new methods of citizen participation to policy processes regarding complex technoscientific issues. As a test case study, the topic of GMO research was selected as the main focus of panel discussions.

Two participatory meetings with citizens were held; the purpose was to test out methods for a direct and interactive involvement of different stakeholders (such as interests group, consumers associations and member of the general public alongside professional experts, representatives of the business sectors and scientists).

Two parallel procedures were designed and implemented in March 2004 involving stakeholders and two citizen panels selected by age, gender, educational level and geographic area. Members of the first panel were offered brief presentations by selected experts and stakeholders, with an aim to start the discussion on a balanced representation of different points of view. Members of the second panel could, instead, choose from a list of experts and stakeholders those they wanted to consult.

Specific social research tools were used (ex-ante and ex post questionnaires, telephone follow up, discourse analysis) to thoroughly evaluate the activity results. The analysis show relevant effects with respect to learning, participation and effectiveness of decision-making models.

Keywords: Innovation, Evaluation, Participation, Citizenship

1. Introduction

Contemporary techno-scientific innovations have raised a fall in traditional decision making processes showing the weakness of experts' system and the traditional alliance with politicians in western societies. These innovations have undergo hard trials for conventional processes of decision making based on representative democracy in the coming of strong technological innovations. The use of GMO's in agriculture and the food production represent one of the most emblematic case in this realm, causing a divisive debate among social actors [1].

Contemporary reflections over that issue and recent UE documents underline the value to collect social needs and claims of the civil society, to conduct an effective innovation's policy [2]. In the recent years, given several types of troubles mentioned before, it has developed a wide discussion over decisions' processes concerning uncertainties' practices in the democratic system, causing by the introduction of wider techno-scientific innovation [3]. On this line the Region Lombardia has conducted an institutional experimentation named PPGI Project (Public Participation and Governance of Innovation), in collaboration with the Bassetti Foundation and Observa, regarding the involvement of citizens and others social actors, managing the issue of GMO's experimentation in open field.

Two alternative panel methods were tested and overall the initiative brought citizens to interact openly with experts and stakeholders, triggering an interesting and constructive debate.

2. A two-side approach for participation

The purpose of the two public meeting was to introduce new methods for a direct and interactive inclusion in the discourse of public policies of affected social actors, such as interests group, consumers associations and member of the general public alongside professional experts, company and scientists considering that in Italy such participative practices are an exception [4].

After a first study phase related to the main deliberative methods used at the international level (e.g citizen panels, consensus conferences) and their adaptability to the Italian context, two participative procedures were designed and implemented in March 2004 involving scientists, farmers' associations, consumers, environmental organisations and two citizens' panels selected by age, gender, course of studies and geographic area.

After this phase two full days meeting were realized with two different panels of 14 citizens from the region, selected

by: age, gender, educational level, area of residency from an initial dbase of 11.000 names. Meetings were conducted by a professional moderator.

Members of the first panel were offered brief presentations by selected experts and stakeholders, with an aim to start the discussion on a balanced representation of different points of view. Members of the second panel could, instead, choose from a list of experts and stakeholders those they wanted to consult.

Both citizens' panels produced a final report summarising the indications having regard to decision-making processes related to the topic under examination (see table 1). All discussions were videotaped upon explicit consent from the participants.

Table 1 Overview of participatory methods

PHASES	PROCEDURE A	PROCEDURE B
1. Preliminary discussion, selection of experts and stakeholders for phase 2	Only Citizens Panel	Presentation by six speakers (three experts+three stakeholders) selected by organisers
2. Debate with 3 speakers selected among 10 experts and stakeholders	Citizens discussing with three experts and stakeholders of their own selection	Debate with experts and stakeholders
3. Preparation of a final consensus document	Only Citizens Panel	Only Citizens Panel

The whole project was carried out under the supervision of a scientific committee with national and international members. Specific social research tools were used (ex-ante and ex post questionnaires, telephone follow up, discourse analysis) to thoroughly evaluate the activity results.

3. Discussion

A first issue discussed during the meetings was that of research and its social role. Most of the citizens involved expressed trust and constructive considerations with regard to scientists and their activities. Positive opinions and attitudes emerged, considering research as a value in itself and – in particular in this area – as a useful medium to improve safety and control over food circulation.

Particular emphasis was placed also on the information issue. Citizens have underlined the need to be well informed about goals and results of the open field trials. The local authorities, the Region in this case, must design an effective and transparent information campaign focused on transgenic agriculture and field trials sites selected.

During the debates, the risk issue emerged with particular relevance both in terms of human and environment safety. All citizens expressed the need to have sufficient guarantees, firstly by the scientific community, to predict costs and drawbacks of innovation. The definition of these guarantees must be tied up to a careful selection of the experimental sites.

A significant deal of the meeting discussion was dedicated to analyze the decision process connected to the matter of GMOs open field trials. In the opinion of the participants the Region, not the State, must be the main political level at which stage the research activities should be directed. Decision makers should adequately consult the various stakeholders, experts, local politicians and citizens. Particular attention should be devoted to local communities where open field trials will be situated. Regional policy level must be strongly connected to the State level, being monitored by competent Scientific Authorities such as ISS (Health National Institute).

Content analysis revealed a stability of values, prejudices and individual attitudes in procedure A and, in general, a central area of beliefs, more open to negotiations during procedure B.

4. Conclusion

The process and content evaluation of the meetings indicated in the first place a high motivation on the part of citizens to be actively involved in the debates on techno-scientific innovations, which confirms the result of recent national and transnational surveys [5, 6]. Specific participatory procedures involving citizens, experts and stakeholders seem capable also in a country like Italy - with scarce tradition of involvement of citizens in policy procedures comparable to other institutional contexts - to promote an open and balanced debate, facilitating a more articulate and constructive emergence of positions than traditional consultation methods such as polls [7].

On the basis of this experimentation, it is possible to formulate some reflections on democratic processes for public participation in policy processes.

Consultations and dialogue among citizens, experts and stakeholders assume particular effectiveness during the first stage of public policy definition. Nevertheless, also in other phases of development (i.e. improvement and evaluation) citizens and diverse social actors' suggestions can be usefully taken into account in the policy process. Participatory methods like consensus conferences do allow decision makers to have a more articulated view of the social positions and issues at stake with regard to a specific theme [8].

Using methods of dialogue and participation could also improve decision makers legitimacy in the face of citizens, especially in the case of complex subject with a significant impact on local communities. These methods favour inclusion processes of citizens which otherwise would be difficult to reach.

Of course participatory methods cannot straightforwardly replace traditional democratic decision processes such as those taking place in regional or national Governments/Parliaments. Rather, they can be seen as complementing instruments which can be used in some cases and with regard to specific issues [9]. However, participatory methods should not be seen as manipulative medium to obtain citizen consensus on already defined policy strategies but rather as open arenas for constructive debates [10]. In this sense, it should be noticed that one of the indications emerging from the project was the need for an independent body or agency to perform and organize such participatory assessment procedures. Citizens, in fact, seem to be quite sceptical when such initiatives are organized by those same institutions which are set to take policy decisions, i.e. regional or national governments.

In this light, it seems plausible to devise the development and institutionalisation of these kind of projects into an independent agency – yet related to the regional council – which can provide advice on the basis of participatory procedures involving citizens, in a way not dissimilar to other similar agencies like the Swiss Centre for Technology Assessment [11].

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