

Event

There is considerable variability in the forms democratic engagement might take. This is particularly apparent when comparing how engagement occurs across different sociopolitical contexts. A review of English language scholarship on democratic engagement in science policy reveals that contributions have been made by academics in several countries and across disciplines including sociology, policy studies, education, psychology, philosophy, and the sciences.

Significance

Governments faced with developing policy on complex and/or controversial technological innovations increasingly rely upon democratic engagement. Once an issue has been targeted for public input, organizers must still determine what type of instrument best suits their objectives, who to involve and invite, and how to evaluate the success of what they have done and measure the impact of its resolution.

Analysis

Comparing themes in the literature across national contexts illuminates what may be regarded from a more synoptic perspective as *taken-for-granted* themes and commonalities.

Common concerns include:

- 1) *Effective design*: Even instruments that have been used with great success (e.g. consensus conferences) are vulnerable to poor design. For example, if the sponsor of the exercise limits possible outcomes to its own favoured choices, the consultation risks appearing 'illegitimate' with the possible consequence of compromising the sponsor's legitimacy as well.
- 2) *Persistent assumptions about 'lay' knowledge*¹: There have been many cases where perspectives gleaned from public consultation have contributed to better policy making. There are also strong arguments to be made for simply promoting more frequent dialogue between scientists, policy makers, and citizens; most deliberative engagement processes, upon evaluation, have found this to be a positive outcome for participants.
- 3) *Reflexivity*, with regard to design and in acknowledging the social commitments in technological development. If technologies are reflective of social commitments, it is reasonable to suggest that some form of social adjudication should be exercised in their development.
- 4) *Impact and uptake*: Policy making requires making the best available choice based on a synthesis of evidence with a plurality of social viewpoints. Small-scale deliberative activities have frequently shown that achieving such a synthesis is possible, but plurality is still seen as a stumbling block to effective use of consultation findings. Many governments are still not competent in following through after engagement (despite risks to accountability and legitimacy).

Conclusion

The increasing drive to find new ways to engage publics earlier in, and in more aspects of, the decision-making process may challenge the usual workings of a scientific evidence-based policy system which is accustomed to puzzling through issues prior to offering advice, but both are essential elements of new governance formations. The type of cross-national analysis described here – which includes the identification of common themes across contexts – can contribute insights to both scholarly and practical approaches to participation in science and technology policy.

¹ See the frequently cited Wynne, B. (1996). May the sheep safely graze? A reflexive view of the expert-lay knowledge divide. *Risk, Environment & Modernity: Towards a New Ecology*. S. Lash, B. Szerszynski and B. Wynne. London, Sage: 27-44.