A conceptual tool for successful participation

Subject

Participation initiatives can fail due to the gap between participants' representations of what participation means or implies and the process they are involved in or how they perceive it.

Rationale

Framing the participative initiative into the decisional process helps to prevent the failure of participation.

Objectives

Depicting each decisional process thoroughfully can turn out to be extremely difficult and time-consuming. Hence, using a generic model can overcome this difficulty. The '*decisional fountain*' model is used here to prevail over some of the limitations associated with the well-known participation meta-models such as Arnstein's (1971) or Kingston's (1998) ladders or Nobre's ruler (2001). While the latter lights some hidden dimensions of different kinds of participation, the former had already gone a step further by considering the relations the participants have with the early phases of the decision-making process. The decisional fountain model allows the identification of other kinds of participation. Furthermore, it increases the acceptability of participation by avoiding ranking its kinds.

Decisional perspective on participation

Participatory methods can be defined as tools for improving the decision-making processes by enlarging them to other stakeholders. This is due to the necessity to mobilize information (values, knowledge and data) or to favour social legitimacy of a decision in order to reduce the decisional mistakes whether scientific, technical, cultural, political or human in nature.
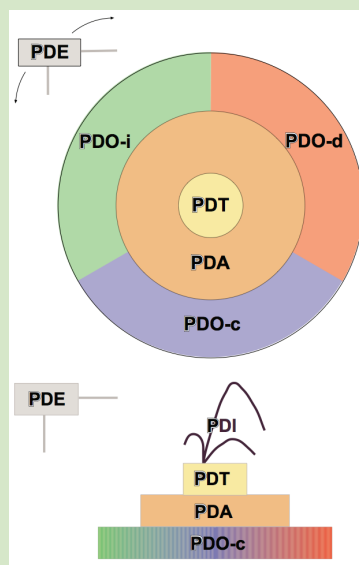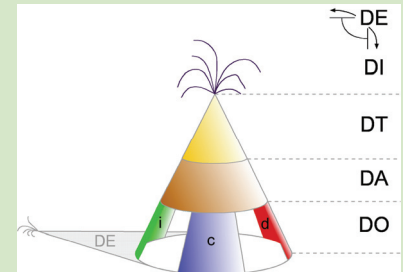
Possible participation modes within a decisional process

A legitimate decisional process is a process that has been conducted with the purpose of keeping stakeholders satisfied. In other words, legitimacy measures the political and social acceptability of a decision. In this perspective, some participatory methods can be used as political barometer to indicate and assess the social acceptability of some specific decisions or public projects.

Thus, explaining participation through a generic decisional model enlightens the participants and enhance their involvement.

The public participation can take place within the different phases of the decisional process (DO-d, DO-c, DO-i, DA, DT, DI, and DE). If more phases are participatory, the better accepted a decision might be. On the other hand, the higher the participation, the harder it is to manage.

The 'decisional fountain'

This generic model of decision structures the decision-making process in five phases and three bases:

DO: DOcumentation/information phase is interconnecting the bases which serve for the decisional process
DO-d: data base
DO-c: context base (including knowledge)
DO-i: issue base (including objectives)
DA: Decisional Analysis step integrates the documentation and identifies the alternatives
DT: Decision Taking is the moment at which the choice is done
DI: Decision Implementation step turns the decision into actions, policies, knowledge
DE: Decision Evaluation phase is in itself a decision-making process. It can be considered as a decisional fountain itself.

Some tips

The decisional model should be explained before using it to highlight the kind of participation expected in the participative process.

The decisional fountain can be distorted to fit the particular environment to which it is applied. Hence, it will render the temporal character of the process. Furthermore, it can be used at different levels of detail.

References

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Bernard Cornélis, Sébastien Brunet, Pierre Delvenne and Geoffrey Joris
Université de Liège

SPIRAL Scientific and Public Involvement in Risk Allocations Laboratory