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Author(s): Sharp, L.

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Public participation and policy: unpacking connections in one British LA21

Abstract

Within western cultures, the term 'public participation' has strong positive connotations, and is associated with the promotion of democracy. The contention of this paper is that these invocations of democracy - although not entirely inaccurate - obscure the varied and tangible effects of public participation on wider policy processes. Drawing on Sharp and Connelly 2001, this paper argues that participation should not be analysed in terms of the type of democracy it invokes, but rather in terms of the extent and nature of its influence on the policy process. In particular, the policy process is examined for conflict between participants over (1) the extent of participation, (2) the nature of participation and (3) the influence of the participation, as well as (4) the outcomes to which it leads. This approach to the analysis of participation is demonstrated through a study of one element of participation in an authority's Local Agenda 21 process. The paper concludes that participation is inherently political and practitioners need to act strategically to manage participation in support of progressive agendas.

Introduction

Within western cultures, the term 'public participation' has strong positive connotations. Its frequent use in policy documents has the effect of invoking the good feelings which most of us attach to democracy (for example, HMSO, 1969; UNCED, 1992; Stationary Office, 2000). The contention of this paper is that these invocations of democracy - although not entirely inaccurate - obscure the varied and tangible effects of public participation on wider policy processes.

Planning and policy research that has considered participation has reflected these positive connotations. Frameworks for the analysis of participation concentrate on the extent to which power is shared, or the nature of democracy invoked (Arnstein, 1969; Thornley, 1977; Wilcox, 1994; Young, 1996; Stoker, 1997). For example, Arnstein's classic article on the 'ladder of participation' contrasts the manipulation of citizens on the implicitly inferior lower rungs of the ladder, with the 'citizen power' of higher rungs. Such analyses have their value. However, they focus on the participation process in isolation, implying that its boundaries can be clearly delineated. The analyses do not study the policy processes to which participation contributes. Although it is unstated, this focus appears to assume that the outputs of participation are rationally fed into existing policy processes. This assumption seems surprising given the otherwise widespread acceptance that policy processes are neither linear nor rational (Lindblom, 1959; Innes, 1990; Healey, 1997).

An alternative approach to the analysis of participation is to view it as part of a wider policy process (Alterman, 1982; Petts, 2001; Sharp and Connelly, 2001). Such analyses view policy-making as messy, and see participation as one of a number of informational inputs to this process (Innes, 1990). From this perspective, different actors within the policy process will emphasise the use and importance of different

informational inputs, depending on the procedural and substantive outcomes that they favour¹. The particular democratic nature of participation will be used to emphasise the importance of participatory inputs. At the same time other actors may contest the legitimacy of the participation in order to emphasise the importance of other sources of policy ideas. Overall, this analysis suggests that participation needs to be analysed through considering its direct and indirect effects on policy.

This paper exemplifies the alternative policy-oriented approach to the analysis of participation through its application to a Local Agenda 21 (LA21) process. Stimulated by the earth summit in 1992, LA21 processes involve the development of programmes for sustainability within a particular locality. Existing analyses of participatory processes in LA21 have stressed the potential for new dialogue opportunities contributing to new forms of governance (Young, 1997; Selman and Parker, 1997; Buckingham-Hatfield and Percy, 1999), the continuing limitations on the involvement of groups commonly excluded from decision-making (Wild and Marshall, 1999; Freeman, 1999; Knightsbridge-Randall, 1999; Buckingham-Hatfield and Matthews, 1999), and the structural limitations to the impact of locally based sustainability programmes (Marvin and Guy, 1997; Patterson and Theobald, 1999; Evans and Percy, 1999). The focus of this paper is on the first of these themes. The policy-oriented analysis of LA21 processes will enable an examination of the *impact* as well as the extent of new dialogue opportunities developed in one British local authority.

An alternative approach: Participation and policy

Connelly and Sharp draw on a discursive approach to policy studies that sees policy development as a continual game in which actors with different goals compete (Connelly and Sharp, 2001; Sharp and Richardson, 2001; Myerson and Rydin, 1996; Hajer, 1995)². During policy development actors will frequently draw on different policy inputs - technical information, examples of best practice, as well as participation - to support their preferred policy agenda. The extent, nature and significance of each of these inputs may be subject to contestation between different actors.

This view of policy making begins to indicate how participation should be examined. A central contention of this approach is that participation should be considered in the context of the whole policy process. The initial analysis should identify the participation to be examined and the policy process to which it contributes. It should also identify competing policy actors that have an interest in the policy process. Investigating the participation then involves examining the process of the actors' competition. Such analysis can be structured through the examination of four overlapping phases of policy-making:

¹ In this paper an important distinction is made between substantive and procedural policy goals. Substantive policy goals are goals about substantial policy outcomes – the goal of achieving more green-space in urban areas, for example. Procedural policy goals are goals concerning the process through which policy is made – the goal of involving a wide range of stakeholders, for example.

² The theoretical approach to policy making described in this section is a development of the author's ongoing work with Steve Connelly. A fuller though earlier version of this approach can be found in Sharp and Connelly (2001) and a more recent version in Connelly and Sharp (2001).

- The first phase involves contestation over the nature of policy inputs. The **extent** of participation will depend on the perceived competing advantages of different policy inputs. Actors may draw on arguments about democracy, accountability or ‘value for money’ to justify expenditure on one policy input rather than another.
- The second phase involves contestation over the **nature** of the participatory process. In particular, actors may contest the agenda, timing, geographical scale, style and participants of the process. The ‘nature’ of the finally agreed participation will affect its potential to challenge existing policy agendas. Different types of participation that challenge the same agenda can therefore be compared in terms of their relative ‘degree of challenge’.
- The third phase occurs later in the policy process, with contestation over the **significance** of participatory inputs. The analysis may show how actors draw on different models of democracy in order to affect whether the potential to challenge a particular agenda is realised. It considers whether and why participation processes that are judged to have exhibited a high ‘degree of challenge’ were able to realise this potential.
- The final phase concerns the ends of the policy-making and **outcomes** of the policy process. The key factor to identify here concerns which group of actors achieved their favoured policy ends. It should be noted, however, that research on ongoing policy processes may only be able to give an indication of what occurs in this late phase.

This alternative approach to participation incorporates factors considered in other theories of participation, but places them in a wider policy context. For example, conflict between actors over the nature of participation is likely to be expressed in terms of differences of opinion about who should participate, what they should be asked, and how these questions are put. While the emphasis on conflict may be new, the importance of participants, agenda and means of engagement have long been highlighted by a range of commentators seeking ways to characterise participation (for example, Alterman, 1982; Wilcox, 1994; Webler *et al.*, 1995). Likewise, the idea that different models of democracy lead to different participation designs was used by Thornley as far back as 1977 (Thornley, 1977 and subsequently Gutch, 1979; Stoker, 1997; Campbell and Marshall, 2000). The policy-oriented analysis has merely extended this idea to suggest that different actors use these models as rhetorical devices to argue about the extent, nature and significance of participation during policy design. Finally, Petts and Chess both incorporate important evaluative questions about both the outcomes of participation (Chess, 2000; Petts, 2001). The policy-oriented approach expands on these questions – not just asking whether the participation had an affect on outcomes, but additionally investigating the processes through which these outcomes were effected.

The crucial assumption that underlies this alternative approach is that actors will seek policy inputs that will support their favoured policy agenda³. Actors are therefore viewed as behaving instrumentally to support particular policy ends. This assumption does not mean that all actors are seen as motivated by political commitment to

³ This account of policy making is expressed in terms of policy goals, motivations and agendas in order to make it accessible to wide audiences. The view explained, however, is much influenced by a discourse-based understanding of policy processes (Sharp and Richardson, 2001).

substantive policy agendas. On the contrary, many actors will be motivated by more personal or selfish motives such as pleasing their manager, or expanding their responsibilities (Alterman, 1982). Moreover, insofar as actors are focused on policy-making goals, their central concern may be fulfilling the procedural commitments as much as achieving substantive policy changes. The key point is that whether an actor's motivation is substantive, procedural, or personal, many of their actions will also provide implicit pressure towards a consistent set of substantive policy ends. Of course, this conclusion does not mean that the contestation over participation will be couched in terms of substantive policy ends. Indeed, to do so would potentially undermine the foundations of an actor's own arguments. The policy process requires that actors (appear to) accept the assumption that policy is made in a rational and democratic way. In other words, their support for particular policy ends may not be conscious.

A Case Study of Local Agenda 21

The empirical part of this paper will investigate participation in a case study authority's Local Agenda 21 (LA21) process. It should be stressed that there were a number of different elements of participation in this LA21 process. For the sake of brevity, this paper focuses on just two of these elements, the 'questionnaire' and the 'participation workshops'. In accordance with the framework described above, the analysis will begin by specifying the participation to be studied and the policy process to which it contributed. It will then examine the development of the policy process in terms of the contestation over the extent, nature and significance of the participation concerned.

The empirical information in this section is drawn from a wider research project considering contestation about sustainability in British local government (Sharp, 1999a; Sharp, 1999b). The case study authority examined is unitary, and operates in a prosperous district in the SE of England. The research was conducted in two phases of two weeks each in 1996 and 1997 respectively. The first phase of the research – and the bulk of the interviews – occurred approximately twelve months after the participatory processes examined in this paper had been completed. The research in the case study authority drew on 12 local authority documents (including meeting minutes and reports on participation), 27 interviews with officers, members, volunteer meeting presenters and participants, and involved the observation of 6 meetings, including two 'consultation workshops' (these were the follow up the 'participation workshops' examined in this paper). The author was not a direct participant in the LA21 process, though feedback given during the second phase of the research contributed to the further development of the LA21. The story of the participation in LA21 that is told in this paper, therefore, is one resolution of the wide range of post-hoc reflections on the LA21 process that were received through interview, cross checked with documentation and observation of contemporary meetings.

Initial Analysis

The Rio agreement in 1992 stated that local authorities should take advantage of their position as ‘the level of government closest to the people’ and promote sustainable development through ‘educating, mobilising and responding to the public’ (UNCED, 1992: 28.1). The central mechanism envisaged for achieving this was the development and implementation of a ‘local agenda 21’ - a locally tailored programme for sustainable development. The case study authority was one the earliest British authorities to institute an LA21 programme with the first activities getting underway towards the end of 1993 at the instigation of the Leader of the Council. The explicit objective of the LA21 process was to create a new agenda with additional environmental activities for the Council.

As documentation indicates, the Council’s initial plans for LA21 envisaged several different forums through which the public could participate in the policy making process. The final LA21 process included four distinguishable participatory processes, arranged in order of their initiation below:

- The first and most important LA21 participation process was the establishment of five project teams. Each team involved a ‘Leader’ - a senior Council officer from the Department whose policies were judged most likely to be affected by the team’s findings. Each team also involved a representative from each of three voluntary groups: the local Friends of the Earth group, the local Civic Society, and the local Chamber of Commerce. The teams were intended to develop policy over a period of three years in each of five environmental policy areas: Work and Economy, Transport, Waste and Pollution, Energy and Nature Conservation. The output of each team was to be combined to create the authority’s LA21 strategy.
- Once the project teams were established, guidance was provided for their policy making by a reply-paid environmental questionnaire that was distributed to all households in the district. This questionnaire formed the first part of what the Council called its ‘participation stage’, which is examined in this paper.
- Further input to the project teams’ deliberations arose from the participation workshops. Run by volunteer presenters from local environmental groups, the workshops were offered to a wide range of community and voluntary groups in the area. In total, 28 workshops were run. The objective of the workshops was to explain LA 21 and to draw out the public’s views and ideas on environmental policy. The workshops were the second part of the ‘participation stage’. The output of the workshops was fed into the project teams policy-making before the draft LA21 document was produced.
- Finally, following the perceived success of the participation workshops a series of ‘consultation workshops’ were established in a similar format to give the public a chance for comment on the draft Local Agenda 21 document.

The completed LA21 strategy was published after the end of the consultation stage at the beginning of 1997.

Interviews with participants and officers revealed a number of interesting tensions that contributed to the development of the LA21 process. These tensions occurred in the late 1980s and early 1990s when the Parks department developed co-operative ventures with local community groups. Much to the Council’s embarrassment, the

projects were substantially delayed because of failures of communications between different Council departments. For some officers, the initiation of a *corporate* process of environmental policy development was a direct consequence of these problems. Certainly, the design of the LA21 process seems to have facilitated corporate working; for example, though the LA21 co-ordinator was to be managed from the Environmental Health department, the person appointed was an established and respected member of the planning department.

The tensions pre-dating LA21 also continued in various guises through the course of the initiative. Two opposing approaches to environmental policy can be identified:

- One set of policy makers set up LA21 to achieve a corporate review of environmental policy. As many of these actors articulated in interview, they anticipated that the particular *substantive* direction of the review would be determined through the input of external participants. These policy-makers typically expressed high levels of mutual respect – they regarded the initiatives developed or run by each other as progressive developments. Key individuals associated with this approach include the Director of Environmental Health, the LA21 co-ordinator, and, crucially, the 1994 Leader of the Council, as well as many more junior officers.
- An alternative approach to environmental policy sought to retain the status quo, seeking to limit the development of environmental co-ordination. Indeed, it was the effective dominance of this approach (in undermining the previous attempts at environmental co-ordination) that stimulated the formation of LA21 in the first place. On a procedural basis, retaining the status quo meant policy-making by individual departments and committees. Substantively, it implied that innovation – while promoted by competition between departments - would also be limited by the interests, resources and competencies of individual departments and their associated member committees. Actors within this group of policy-makers were typically cautious in their enthusiasm for the LA21 process at interview. In particular, a number noted the tensions between representative democracy and the need to involve outside participants. Individuals most closely associated with this ‘conservative’ approach included the directors of some Council services, as well as a few elected members and a few more junior officers.

The story of LA21 in the case study authority can be seen as an account of an ongoing contest between these two approaches.

The extent of participation: LA21 process as a whole

How were decisions made over the relative importance of participation as compared to other policy inputs? This section analyses the role anticipated for participation at the beginning of the LA21 process, as well as considering how the role of participation evolved through time. In particular, it highlights how the participation stage (which included both the questionnaire and the workshops) became viewed as increasingly important as the LA21 process developed.

Council minutes show that the authority’s initial vision of its LA21 process was centred on the project teams. However, it also suggested that the policies developed would be subject to participation and consultation stages. By contemporary standards,

these initial LA21 structures introduced a relatively low level of participation. By the standards of 1993, however, the case study authority was relatively progressive and participative (LGMB, 1994).

At interview, officers and members stressed that this decision to pursue a participatory approach arose from elected members' desire to be seen to be involved in a 'leading authority' in this area. The choice to follow and improve on what was then seen as the best practice of Leicester's 'Environment City' model was a safe way to achieve this. A second factor in the authority's choice to emphasise participation *may* have related to the need for a corporate LA21 process. Some interviewees certainly stressed how outsiders' presence in the LA21 process acted as a subtle brake on any tendencies of officers to 'empire build' for their own departments. Moreover, co-ordination between different teams could be encouraged because the 'outside participants' were all members of the same local interest groups.

The development of a relatively participatory LA21 process could therefore be seen as a bold move by reformers to become a leading authority through the development of a corporate environmental policy. However, this does not mean that the interests of the conservative elements were entirely ignored. The initiative required their input to be genuinely corporate. Their not-always-keen involvement was won through a combination of coercion from the Council's leader and the 'carrot' for each senior officer of being project team leader in their own field of responsibility. Moreover, apart from the three voluntary sector invitees, Council leaders could invite whosoever they wanted on to the project teams. This structure handed senior staff considerable control over the agenda and participants in their individual 'bit' of the LA21 process.

The extent of participation: participation stage

Council minutes indicate how in 1993 initial plans for the LA21 process included a participation stage that would occur before a draft LA21 document was produced. It was implied that this participation stage would be organised by individual project teams. By the end of 1994, however, council minutes present the participation stage as a single umbrella process to be centrally organised by the LA21 office.

The LA21 co-ordinator suggests that the shift occurred for two reasons. Firstly, he highlights how external advice from the LGMB and others was increasingly emphasising the participative aspects of LA21. Greater emphasis on participation was therefore needed if the authority were to continue to be leading in this area of policy. Secondly, he emphasises how the project teams were not operating in such a participative way as had been expected, with many of the voluntary members dropping out, and most teams chaired by senior council staff rather than participants. Further mechanisms were therefore needed to ensure that the LA21 reflected community preferences.

The latter justification is given considerable support from other interview evidence. Stories of 'stand-up rows' in some team meetings, combined with the dismissal of outside participants as 'representing a small minority', 'coming from fringe organisations' and being 'the more vociferous members of the public who we always hear from anyway' certainly indicate that difficult meetings occurred. A broader participation process that drew on more members of the public provides an interesting

way of addressing these difficulties. External claims that LA21 was participative could now stand on the two prongs of the project teams and a wider participation process. Moreover, the new broader process could also be used to counter internal complaints about the unrepresentativeness of outsiders on the project teams.

One final point, however, is needed to put the LA21 co-ordinators' comments in context. It is true that one project team – led by a particularly conservative senior officer – resisted the take over the participation stage, arguing that the team could organise its own participation processes. This evidence supports the LA21 co-ordinator's emphasis on the importance of the participation stage. However, interviewees from other project teams did not share this view. It seems that most teams were already stretched to capacity producing their LA21 action plans. Few of their members who were interviewed appear to have even noticed that a change of plan about LA21 participation had occurred.

The nature of participation

The report introducing the participation and consultation stages lists a wide range of objectives including, 'raising awareness of issues', 'securing commitment to policies', and 'obtaining ideas and information'. These objectives already indicate that the need to increase external knowledge and understanding of the participation process had equal (if not greater) status than ensuring that the public can influence policy. It is clear that the LA21 office was committed to increasing participation in LA21, but only in ways which could be fed into the existing LA21 policy making process.

The first part of the participation stage, a reply-paid questionnaire, followed an article on environmental issues in the Council's free magazine that was distributed to all households. This method was selected because it was seen as the easiest way to contact all residents in the district. The questionnaire was lengthy, with questions probing the importance of different environmental issues, the causes of these problems, and barriers to individual action. All but one project team contributed questions to the questionnaire.

The facilitator from the one team refusing to participate in the questionnaire explained that their team had carried out their own participation process through a stall at the local carnival. Interestingly, this individual was one of those who criticised the project team processes for being unrepresentative.

The questionnaire received almost 4000 responses, from approximately 3% of households in the district. The compiled responses were provided to each project group to assist in the design of their action plans. In addition, a list of respondents requesting further information became the basis for an LA21 mailing list.

Although the questionnaires' sections link to the project teams' topics, the precise mechanism through which the results were to influence the teams' actions plans is not clear. For example, it is difficult to envisage how the pollution action plan would have been altered according to the percentage of the public who considered car exhausts a 'very important' cause of air pollution in the district. This observation highlights how the achievements of the questionnaire had more to do with raising awareness of issues than collecting information to improve policy.

The idea to extend the participation stage through a workshop programme was first introduced by an LA21 office volunteer - an experienced trainer – who designed and developed the programme. The workshops involved a short video that explored environmental topics using locations in the area, after which trained volunteers sought to draw out the audience's opinions about the issues presented. Discussion, votes and brainstorming elicited the audience's view on the 'most important' topic from the project team topics, and their ideas for action on the three topics voted most important. In the words of the LA21 co-ordinator, 'the workshops were tightly controlled to topic – it was not open to participants to discuss social justice or dog mess – but their input under broad headings was completely open'.

Invitations to participate in programme were sent to 400 organisations with 'broad interests' that had been selected from the 2000 groups listed in the local Community Information Directory. Volunteers and Council officers ran a total of 28 workshops, 22 with groups or societies and six open workshops for members of the public. Overall, the workshops involved a total of 669 people, with an average attendance of 25 people per workshop. Compiled responses showed which topics were voted most important, and listed ideas for action in each of the project teams' topic areas.

Whereas the questionnaire had little potential to influence the project teams' action plans, the workshops appear to offer slightly more space for comment. In particular, the lists of 'ideas for action' on each project team topic appear to provide a checklist of actions that project teams could check off against their own intended policies. For this reason, it is the output of workshops that will be the focus of the following section.

The significance of participation

The results of the questionnaire and the community workshops were fed back to the project teams in early 1996, while the teams were drafting their policy recommendations. While the project team processes had 'fixed' some of the parameters of the future local agenda 21 document (for example, the project team topics had compartmentalised environmental policy into 'energy', 'transport', 'the natural environment' and so on), the output of the participation stage still had the potential to impact upon the way the issues were broken down within a particular topic, and upon the nature of the actions recommended.

It appears that project teams varied in their reactions to the workshop information. At interview, the project team participants recalled the participation exercise as 'motivating', 'showing a positive response to our work' (for teams whose issue was ranked as important), or as 'showing how much work we had to do' (for teams whose issue was ranked as unimportant). Despite these varied responses, however, most team facilitators commented that the workshops had made limited impact on their team's action plans. At one extreme, the facilitator who had condemned the unrepresentativeness of the project teams could not recall whether his team had discussed the workshop outputs at all. In a more typical response the facilitator for the energy group stated that 'we did not get a lot out of the workshops'. An exception to these generalisations arose in the natural environment project team. In interview, three team members suggested that this team placed a high priority on participation

and one claimed that over 80% of actions listed originated from participatory exercises.

Do these variations reflect genuine differences in the impact of the workshops, or are they merely indicative of different attitudes to participation on the part of the interviewees? A comparison between actions suggested in the workshops and those listed in the final LA21 document on two different teams' topics can begin to answer this question. The actions listed by workshop participants on energy and on the natural environment both included many suggestions that were beyond the scope or capacity of a local sustainability plan to deliver – for example, 'tax agricultural chemicals', or 'build more nuclear power stations'. Many other outputs were indirectly linked to project team actions. For example, 13 workshop ideas around saving energy in the home (including 'encourage landlords to insulate' and 'switch off lights when not needed') could in theory be linked to the LA21 action to 'set up an energy savers scheme for tenants, homeowners and small businesses'. (In practice it is clear from discussions with the energy team facilitator that these plans were already in place before the output from the workshops was delivered). Likewise, the 11 public suggestions around the planting and protection of trees, including 'plant more trees', and 'replace one tree for each cut down' may or may not have contributed to action 40, 'plant trees, woodlands and hedgerows of native species in streets and open spaces where possible'. These examples illustrate, however, how the precise relationship between the public's ideas and the project teams' action plans are hard to specify. Only in exceptional cases can direct linkages be found, for example workshop participants' preference for, 'more open spaces which are not restricted for children - e.g. with park wardens at known times', may well have been the stimulus for the draft LA21's Natural Environment action, 'use parks officers and improved design to [...] improve safety'.

It appears, therefore, that the participation workshops had some effect on the substantive nature of environmental policy in the Council, but that this was limited by the wide range of topics discussed in the workshops and the rapid pace of 'brainstorming' processes. And perhaps this is not surprising. Except in relation to specific localities, it is difficult to envisage how public workshops could contribute more than a few bright ideas to policies already developed by year-long deliberation of specialist project teams. Should the workshops therefore be regarded as a failed participation exercise, and be condemned as 'manipulation' on Arnstein's ladder of participation (Arnstein, 1969)? This question is examined in the following sections.

Outcomes of the LA21 process

The case study authority's LA21 strategy states, 'about 5000 people have played some part in creating this document'. This indicates the important role of the participation and consultation stages in legitimising the LA21 process. In fact this legitimisation was achieved through a number of routes. Firstly, the process of inviting different parties to participate in the formation of the LA21 strategy (through the project teams, questionnaires and the workshops) increased public knowledge of the LA21, even among those members of the public who did not fill in the questionnaire or reply to the invitations. Secondly, some parts of the participation and consultation stages - most notably the draft LA21 launch at the beginning of the consultation stage -

provided important press coverage of the authority's activities. Thirdly, and probably most importantly, the combination of public visibility and press coverage increased the initiative's profile among the Council's elected members. While the project teams provided (some) real public involvement in policy making, the participation and consultation stages ensured that LA21 was seen to provide opportunities for public involvement in policy making. In this respect they were an essential part of the LA21 strategy.

It is beyond the scope of this article to make a detailed analysis of the 293 substantive policy actions that were listed in the LA21 document, nor of their implementation that followed. Nevertheless, it is important to note that the LA21 process did have significant effects on the Council's policies with respect to the environment. For example, LA21 developed the Council's reputation for being serious about the environment. There were some substantial and innovative developments in the Council's activities, particularly in energy and nature conservation policy. Even on the subject of waste policy, where the LA21 process was wrought with conflict, reformers succeeded in achieving the 'concession' of a long-term goal for the total elimination of waste. The reputation of being serious about the environment in itself led to further developments. The Council was one of the earlier authorities to address environmental management issues across the full range of Council services, and the environment has continued to be an important element in the Council's response to recent modernisation initiatives.

Other outcomes of the LA21 exercise were more unexpected and may be more profound. In particular, LA21 led to a switch in the Council's attitude about the objective of environmental policy. The LA21 process was originally perceived as a process of introducing new *Council* action to improve the environment. One notable finding of the research is that all participative processes contributed - directly or less directly - towards a shift in the Council's view of environmental policy and LA21. The Council came to view these activities as about mobilising activity in the district *as well as* changing the Council's own actions. The scope of the Council's substantive environmental activity was therefore enlarged. This shift to 'enabling' policy making can be seen demonstrated through an analysis of the actions listed in the LA21 strategy. Of the actions listed, only 28% are to be carried out solely by the action of the Council. The participatory exercises therefore challenged the Council to radically reform the nature and scope of its environmental activities.

All the LA21 participation processes contributed to this shift. The key input of the questionnaires was the provision of a mailing list, which was a source of volunteers for the LA21 office's subsequent activities. However, the input of the workshops could be seen as particularly important. The use of the volunteer presenters was the first time that the LA21 team had worked with members of the public as *actors* in delivering policy (albeit, the policy of participation) rather than just as individuals to be consulted. The success of the workshops was indicated by the LA21 office's choice to continue and develop the workshop programme after the LA21 was published.

Should this unexpected outcome be seen as a progressive addition to the repertoire of LA21 activities? One perspective on this question - that taken by progressive officers in the Council - would be that it is an important and necessary addition. From this viewpoint there are some areas of policy where legislative or overarching policy

changes (for example, of planning policy) are inappropriate, untimely, or politically impossible. In these policy areas the stimulation of voluntary action provides some, albeit small, improvement in the treatment of the environment while at the same time raising public awareness of the issues. Through increasing individuals' inter-connectedness in society such actions could also be argued to raise the 'social capital' of the area, and thus provide the potential for greater democratic action in the future (Putnam, 1993). This is the view of LA21 taken by Szerszynski and by Young (Szerszynski, 1997; Young, 1997). An alternative approach, however, would suggest that such voluntary action is a sop, indicating where policy-makers have been unable or unwilling to grasp the nettle and develop an unpopular area of policy. It channels progressive energies into small-scale voluntary activities thus diverting them from fighting for more substantive policy change. The choice between these two interpretations is part of a wider argument about the choices between radical environmental change and less extreme environmental reform (Mol and Spaargaren, 2000). In this particular case, two factors appear critical in the choice: firstly the extent to which voluntary action is an effective means of stimulating political awareness and public support for more wide-ranging reforms, and secondly, the extent to which the legislative body concerned actually has the power to make changes which will have tangible environmental effects.

Conclusions

The analysis has revealed how management of participation had the effect of avoiding explicit conflict with the public, and supporting a progressive agenda in the case study authority. Mechanisms used for such management include the following:

- External participants in the project teams were selected such that they generally had a favourable view of 'progressive' environmental policies. Insofar as conflict did occur within the teams it was *participants* who were arguing for substantive changes to environmental policy against those officers and councillors who favoured a more conservative approach.
- Although the workshops drew on a much wider range of participants the agenda of each workshop was closely managed to channel public comment towards the topics addressed by the project teams. This management enabled the workshop outputs to be incorporated into the existing policy process. (However, the authority might have been able to make better use of the invention and innovation of the public had they followed a more open agenda in advance of the project team process.)
- Despite the limited substantive input made by those participating in the questionnaire and participation workshops, their participation in the LA21 process was central in securing its legitimation and continuation in the Council.

What does this say about the role of participation in relation to democracy? We can conclude that the LA21 participation was managed such that new dialogue opportunities *were* opened up, albeit with the 'progressive' participants of the project teams rather than with the wider public participating in the questionnaire or workshops. Whether or not this is seen as an appropriate extension of democracy

probably depends on the observer's political views. Overall, the LA21 process ensured a change in the council's approach to the implementation of environmental policy, with a shift from Council action to facilitating action by the public. This could also be seen as an indirect means of extending democracy.

The conclusion that participation is managed is hardly revolutionary. The additional insight that this analysis has brought out, however, concerns how and why this management occurred. It is clear that the management of participation was a very effective tool employed by those with a progressive environmental agenda in an ongoing struggle over the nature of environmental policy in the case study authority. Anticipating that such participation would challenge the existing conservative approach to environmental policy, some officers and councillors resisted the participation through a number of mechanisms including their reluctant involvement in the project teams, questioning the legitimacy of team members, refusing to co-operate in the development of the questionnaire, and ignoring the outputs of the workshops. While this resistance had some success in limiting policy innovations around specific environmental topics, the overall momentum built up through the effective management of participation was sufficient to ensure that the whole authority enacted considerable substantive changes in environmental policy.

As an environmentalist, I welcome the extent to which skilful management of participation enabled the progressive agenda to achieve some development in the Council's environmental policy. As an academic I note that my response would be different had similar management of participation been used to reinforce more conservative approaches to environmental policy.

Should such management of participation be condemned as inappropriate manipulation of participants? I would argue not. All ways of structuring participation affect its outcomes – there is no such thing value-neutral participation. Moreover, the potential for participation to have substantive effects on policy means that it will be the subject of conflict between those favouring differing agendas. Explicit awareness of such underlying conflicts enables practitioners to act strategically, ensuring that public participation is managed to support rather than undermine progressive agendas.

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