

Decision-contexts: the key to public engagement

Professor Jacquie Burgess, Environment and Society Research Unit, Department of Geography, UCL

Introduction

ESRU works mainly in the field of environmental decision-making; and specialises in the development of deliberative and inclusive processes in action-based research. The ideas behind this short presentation are drawn from a number of projects completed by members of the Unit. I have been asked to address two questions:

1. What is a deliberative process and how does this differ from dialogue?
2. What are the roles of lay publics and experts (in deliberative processes) and when is it best to seek their advice?

What is deliberation and how does this differ from dialogue?

Deliberation is a form of 'argumentative dialogue'. It is a process which encompasses both thinking and debating i.e. it is both an internal 'mental' process and an external use of language in communicative exchange.

Deliberative rhetoric was one characteristic form of argumentation in Ancient Greece. According to Aristotle, 'deliberative oratory was concerned with matters of the future, as disputants discussed what course of action should be pursued' (Billig, 1996, p.144). It is a process of questioning, based on ensuring that a wide range of alternative courses of action are surveyed; and that pros and cons in terms of their likely outcomes are considered carefully before a decision is made. Deliberation requires that one proposition is challenged by a counter-argument of equal validity. The skill of rhetorical deliberation is to outwit the opponent by the what Michael Billig calls the 'witcraft' of inventive response to any proposition. This intensely creative, linguistic process is never completed finally – although protagonists will always seek the last word, because there are always counter arguments to be developed.

In the stuffy, touchy-feely, overcrowded field of public participation in planning, in science, in healthcare, in New Labour policy-making; there are relatively few processes that genuinely seek to encourage argument. Rather, most dialogue processes emphasise the benefits of 'sharing', seeking consensus through the elimination of difference; and are facilitated to manage down potential dissent between participants. This can sometimes lead to a process/outcome described as 'group-think' where the atmosphere actively stifles counter-views.

Deliberation can take place with oneself, with another person and /or in a larger group context. In public engagement processes, the basis is usually a group of lay people (between 6-20); with a number of experts/specialists introduced at

different stages in the process. Deliberation is always contextualised; and engages the emotions as well as what Billig calls 'open-palmed rationality' (cf. tight-fisted logic').

Table 1 illustrates the over-lapping elements of personal and social experience in a group-based deliberative process

Table 1. Elements of a deliberative process

Aspects of individual engagement with task	Stages of engagement with group
EMOTIONAL	<i>Engage P Commit P Let go</i>
RATIONAL	<i>Recognise P Deliberate P Decide</i>
REFLECTIVE	<i>Clarify P Conceptualise P Evaluate</i>
SITUATIONAL	<i>Join P Participate P Leave</i>

(source: from IPPR Citizen's Juries Launch)

A good process is one which achieves an outcome through the steps outlined in Table 1, although specific communicative processes will vary the mix of experiences.

2. What are the roles of lay publics and experts (in deliberative processes) and when is it best to seek their advice?

ESRU's work has mainly been within the environmental field but we believe our analysis may usefully be applied in other arenas. The model for engaging with stakeholders (figure 1) provides the starting point for deciding whether and how to involve stakeholders, and what to involve them in.

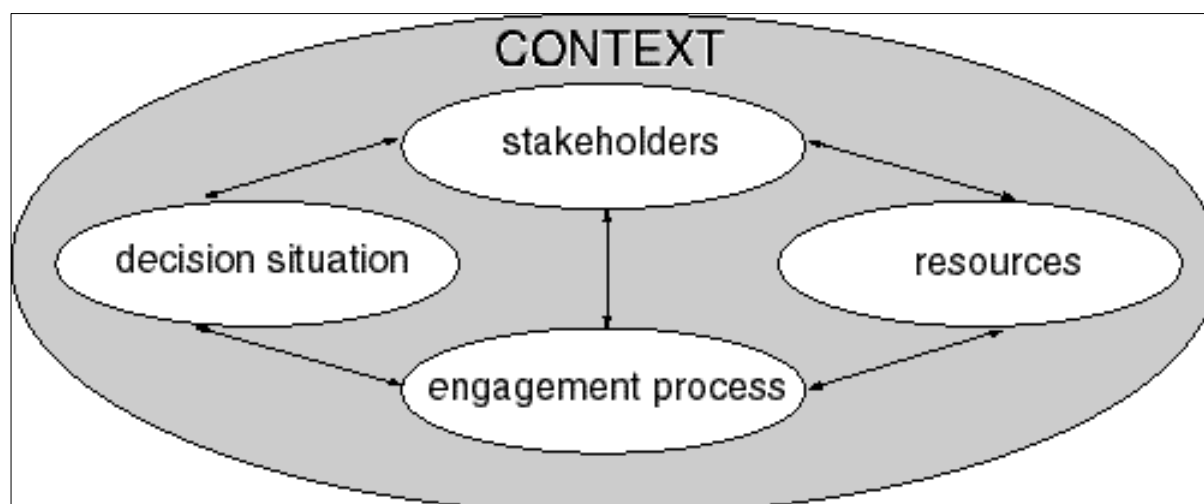


Fig. 1.

The idea behind the model is that the process used should be appropriate to both the decision situation and the stakeholders involved. The concept of 'fitness for purpose' is vital for effective scientific communications. Results from our research on the benefits of local outreach confirm that engaging with stakeholders is a matter of horses for courses. It is not possible to develop a taxonomy for participation that prescribes what process to use in what situation. However stakeholders are engaged, the process must be appropriate to the particularities of the particular geographical context and the decision situation.

The notion that the process used should be 'fit for the purpose' may seem like common sense. But too often a process fails to work as anticipated because it is not well suited to achieving what the user or sponsor requires, or it raises stakeholders' expectations unduly, or both. This is more likely to happen if stakeholders are involved naively, because it seems like a good idea to do so; if consultation or participation is imposed as an external requirement, regardless of whether stakeholders can be *usefully* involved; or if the starting point is a particular process which happens to be the (only) one with which the user is familiar.

Referring to figure 1, the starting point for deciding what to do and how to do it should be the decision situation and its context. The use of the words 'decision situation' should not be taken to imply that stakeholders will necessarily be involved directly in making a decision. It is simply an umbrella term for the specific issue, opportunity, problem, threat or even 'mess' that will be the subject of the process. Context means what lies outside the specific situation but which may affect it or be affected by it. The context will include statutory frameworks and institutional decision making procedures as these will set boundaries for engagement, as well as relevant features of the local (or possibly regional or national) environmental, social, cultural, economic and political context in which both the decision situation and stakeholders are embedded.

The model works through considering a number of key questions in respect of each component. Ideally, components are addressed in the following order: decision situation, stakeholders, process, and resources. However, it will often be the case that the model cannot be worked through linearly and iteration between its components will be required, as reflected by the double headed arrows between them. That is, as answers to questions listed under one component are determined they may reveal a need to go back and reconsider questions raised under a component already considered. Nonetheless, the order should be followed in the first instance. In particular, resource constraints should not *drive* choice of process, though clearly they will influence it.

The model does not prescribe what to do in which situations and contexts. Rather it aims to provide a systematic way of deciding what approach or technique to use with which categories of stakeholders. It narrows down the choice of what to do from what can sometimes appear to be a bewildering array of methodologies but the final choice will always be the sponsor's responsibility. Even then the approach chosen may require adaptation; that is, modification of the details of its design in relation to the decision situation, the

needs and competences of stakeholders, and available resources. And in the end success is achieved as much by *how* a process is conducted as by what process is used.

THE DECISION SITUATION

What do you want to achieve?

Is what you want to achieve open to negotiation?

What approach should you take to stakeholder engagement?

- Inform: do you want to tell stakeholders about the situation and what you plan to do?
- Learn about: do you want to find out about stakeholders' views, concerns or what you can do for them?
- Work together: do you want to work with stakeholders to determine a mutually acceptable outcome?

THE STAKEHOLDERS

Who are the appropriate stakeholders for the decision situation?

It is useful to categorise stakeholders according to the context and scale at which they usually act, and their capacity for engagement. It is important to note that these categories are not mutually exclusive.

- Professionals: This category covers public and private sector organisations and professional (paid staff) voluntary groups, environmental and otherwise. It includes local authorities, government departments, statutory agencies, conservation groups, environmental pressure groups, business and industry and academia working at the local level. Whilst some may act only at the local level many such organisations will have regional or national rather than simply local remits.
- Local groups: This category covers just that, non-professional organised entities that operate at local level. At this level it is important to distinguish between communities of interest, of place, and of identity because each has a different type of relationship to the local.
- Local publics: This category covers citizens in general, that is individuals who represents no-one other than themselves. The term 'publics' is used because the singular 'public' implies some sort of homogeneity whereas in reality 'the (general) public' is heterogeneous and individuals' perspectives and understandings vary widely.

Who should be involved?

Who the relevant stakeholders are will depend on the decision situation. A stakeholder analysis should initially include any stakeholder who could potentially be involved in order to provide a systematic basis for determining whom it is most appropriate to involve. It may be appropriate to use a snowball technique (asking stakeholders known to the user who else they believe should be involved) to ensure that all potential stakeholders are included.

THE CHOICE OF PROCESS

Table 2 categorises different processes according to the goals of the decision situation. The process chosen will need to be appropriate to the decision situation. For example, of techniques in column three multi-criteria approaches are suited to determining priorities but not to determining what the issues are. Other processes are more flexible and can be adapted to a range of action types and aims. An outreach programme comprising several different approaches may be needed for a complex decision situation

Table 2: Local outreach processes

STAKE-HOLDERS	PURPOSE		
	Inform	Learn about	work together
Professionals	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • print/ broadcast/ electronic media • presentation • one-to-one meeting 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • consultation papers • one-to-one meeting • committee/ liaison group/ forum • structured workshop* 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • structured workshop • multi-criteria approaches (for example stakeholder decision analysis) • stakeholder dialogue • visioning • decision conference
Local groups	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • print/ broadcast/ electronic media • exhibition • presentation • one-to-one meeting • telephone hotline 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • consultation papers • one-to-one meeting • liaison group/ forum • structured workshop • focus group 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • structured workshop • participatory appraisal • planning for real • visioning
Local publics	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • print/ broadcast/ electronic media • exhibition • public meeting • telephone hotline 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • opinion survey • citizens panel • deliberative opinion poll • focus group • consultation papers 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • citizens jury • referendum • structured workshop

* structured workshop = tailor-made process

Some techniques appear in more than one cell; for example, presentations may be used to inform both professionals and local groups. In practice, a presentation could be tailored to suit each category of stakeholder, or stakeholders in both categories could be invited to a single presentation. Similarly, a forum might include both *professionals* and *local groups*.

Another choice may be breadth versus depth. For example, using print or electronic media allows information to reach many more people than does a presentation. But a presentation is likely to leave its audience better informed

as people are able to ask questions and clarify the information they are given. Similarly, a citizens panel or opinion survey gathers information from many stakeholders concerning what their views are. Focus groups work with far fewer numbers and their members are considered typical of interests or constituencies are not rather than statistically representative, but they can provide insights into why people might hold those views or opinions. Deliberative processes in which participants work together reach a mutually acceptable outcome require stakeholders to interact intensively with each other and the more participants the longer this will take if the quality of the process is not to be affected.

The processes listed in the third column generally demand greater commitment from those who participate than do those in the other columns. It is for this reason that they appear only in column three, as extensive commitment should be rewarded with real influence. The allocation of processes in column three to *professionals* and *local groups* reflects (based on experience) that some processes are more appropriate than others for engaging *professionals* than for engaging *local groups*, and vice versa. However, if appropriate support is provided there is no reason why *local groups* and *professionals* should not work together using any one of these processes. Bringing different stakeholders together so that they can interact with each other in a non-adversarial way may be more effective in achieving mutually acceptable solutions (that is, *productive*) and more conducive to *mutual learning* than an agency acting as an intermediary or trying to reconcile different positions.

RESOURCES

Do you have sufficient resources to carry out the engagement process well?

Availability of resources may constrain what sort of process can be undertaken, or which stakeholders can be reached or engaged, but resource constraints should not drive the choice of process. That is, the relevant question concerns whether resources sufficient to undertake the most appropriate process for this decision situation and not what can be done with the resources available. An outreach programme or process should not be undertaken unless resources are sufficient to permit it to be done well. A poorly organised and conducted process is less likely to achieve its aims and worse, may alienate stakeholders.

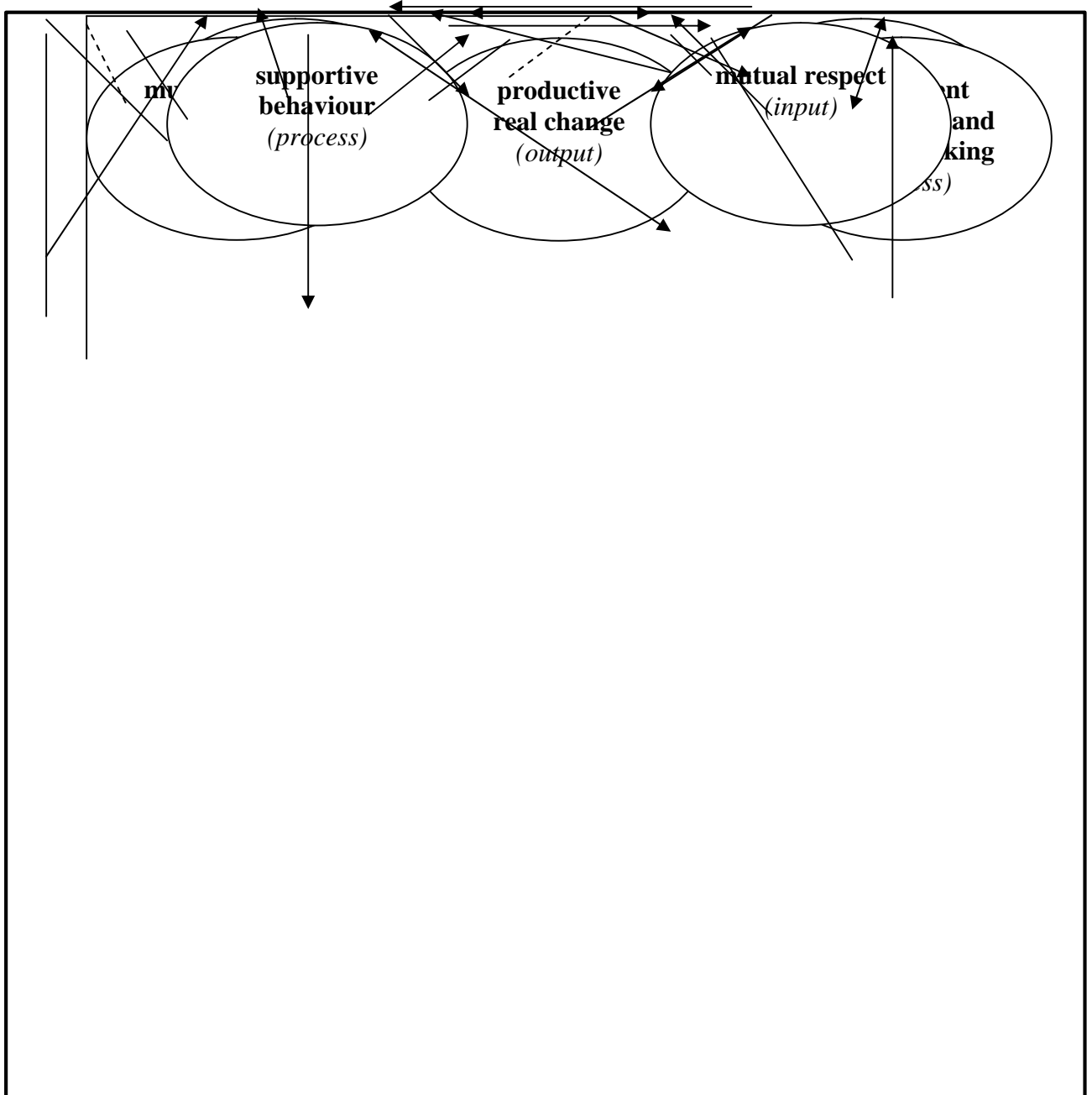
- **Skills:** High quality engagement is particularly dependent on time for the following reasons. First, sufficient time needs to be devoted to preparation and getting the details right. This should ensure that the outreach process chosen is appropriate to the decision situation and suitably targeted. Further, determining clear objectives, setting clear boundaries, and thinking about the situation from the stakeholders' perspectives provides the basis for ensuring that communication with stakeholders is timely and adequate and the process is tailored to achieve real outputs.
- **Time:** Resources comprise time, skills and finance. Second, sufficient time needs to be allowed for the process itself, especially participatory processes for *working together* where the timescale should suit the participants as well as the sponsor. It is important also to begin the

process at the beginning; that is, as early in the decision making process as possible. This too makes demands on time, both the sponsor's and the stakeholders', and if time is limited it may be useful to reflect on what it is most important to negotiate about, perhaps through informal scoping of key issues with stakeholders.

- Finance: If resources appear to be insufficient to support what would be ideal then further iteration through the model may be necessary. High quality deliberative processes are costly.

Evaluating deliberative processes

The material for this short paper is taken mainly from our work to develop a set of robust criteria for evaluating the effectiveness of local outreach processes in local environmental planning (Clark et al. 2001). The following criteria emerged from the research and may provide food for thought for science communicators.



Productive

- resulted in concrete action
- effectiveness of actions

Learning

- extent to which process allowed for dialogue and deliberation
- extent of understanding gained of others' perspectives and positions
- extent of understanding of the sponsor's remit and how it works

References

Billig, M. 1996. *Arguing and Thinking*. London, Routledge.

Clark, J., Stirling, A., Studd, K. and Burgess J. 2001 *Local Outreach: developing a set of criteria to evaluate close and responsive relationships at the local level*. R & D. Prepared for the Environment Agency.