

Participation For All: Why? How?

AIP2 Recommendations for practitioners

A troubling observation

The majority of public participation processes, with few notable exceptions, share the same defect : the «participants» are «always the same».

This observation undermines public participation in two ways. On the one hand, it reduces effectiveness : by engaging only a fraction of the population (which is always the same), participative processes are blinkered and deprived of the richness brought by many points of view. On the other hand, it undermines legitimacy : the «regulars» in public participation only represent a part of the population, to the exclusion of others.

This is troubling because the development of participative processes deepens the gap between those who are «in» (those who participate) and those who are «out», the others, who are «excluded» from participative processes and who are, very often, «marginalised». Not only is the gap between them economic and social but it becomes political, and even moral (along the lines of «the poor have better things to do than to worry about public issues»).

Moving from the participation of the excluded to building open processes

AIP2 has chosen, as its first field of investigation, to examine the issue of participation of the excluded. An internal working group designed and delivered a workshop held at the City Hall of Paris, on 11 October 2010. This workshop offered an occasion to hear three concrete experiences which had placed the participation of the excluded at the heart of their activities.¹

AIP2-France

International Association for Public Participation seeks to promote exchanges and research with the goal of developing, sharing and promoting effective methods of public participation.

AIP2-France brings together practitioners, professionals, non-governmental actors and elected officials. It is part of the International Association for Public Participation (IAP2), an international network active in 19 countries, whose values it shares and promotes.

¹ The Rhône-Alpes Regional Information Mission Against Exclusion (MRIE - Mission régionale d'information contre l'exclusion – Rhône-Alpes) and the K'ose toujours Collective; the City of Nantes for its experience of Citizen Dialogue implemented by Compagnie NAJE; and the City of Blanc-Mesnil.

These presentations, and the debates which followed, provided the AIP2 working group with valuable input. They were examined in more depth by a second working group which developed the recommendations set out below. These discussions led to the conclusion that, however pertinent it may be, the question of the participation of the excluded cannot account for the full complexity of the problems to be addressed.

This is why AIP2 has decided not to focus on the excluded (why should they participate and how?) but rather on the participative processes themselves (how to make them open to everyone, including the excluded?). This regardless of whether the excluded suffer from economic or social exclusion or face barriers to their participation in participative processes for other reasons (due to language, handicap, living conditions, schedules etc.)

An urgent reflection for everyone

AIP2 has chosen to focus on this issue as its members spontaneously considered it a matter of great urgency. To give those who wish to act for the collective good and who sincerely intend to organise consultation processes which are open to all, that do not exclude, but who do not know how. For those who, having already tried participation for all, feel isolated in a sea of indifference or of gullibility. For those, not hitherto conscious of this urgency, for whom our recommendations will strike a chord.

In effect, AIP2 brings together practitioners who, by pooling their know-how and experience, aim to share them in a logic of openness and progress.

An issue for democracy

The participation of all is a central issue for democracy: what kind of democracy excludes the most fragile from public dialogue by putting in place a sort of «selection by precariousness» akin to census suffrage which once selected among citizens and only granted the right to vote to those who paid taxes ?

Moreover, AIP2 is convinced that imaginative solutions favouring the participation of people suffering from social exclusion will, more generally, open paths towards the improvement of consultation methods and public debates as a whole.

A complex issue, modest responses

The discussions held during the October 2010 workshop confirmed the complexity of this issue.

On the one hand, this complexity is *practical*: how to organise a useful discussion with everyone? That is, with people whose personal histories, levels of education, capacities to express themselves, interests and so on are extremely varied?

On the other hand, this complexity is *moral*: how to avoid going too far in seeking everyone's participation? All that would be missing would be for participation to become obligatory! Should we not be wary of a kind of semi-explicit precept which would lead to an inevitably negative moral judgement of non participation? One which would consider non participation as the mark of poor social behaviour, of «passivity» or of an absence of generosity by which the non participant would be judged as a sort of « stowaway »?

The complexity of the issue, as illustrated briefly here, has led AIP2 to formulate a set of modest recommendations. The objective in developing these recommendations is not to establish a set of norms but to offer practitioners some practical paths for reflection which they can then adopt,

enrich, illustrate and extend in the course of the next few years. A wiki has been established on the AIP2 website where all practitioners can find more information and contribute to enriching the debates launched by AIP2.

AIP2 is a member of the international federation of IAP2, and as a result these reflections will be shared with, and enriched by, practitioners who design and deliver participative processes all around the world.

AIP2 recommendations

AIP2 considers that when opening up participative processes to all, and thus to the most fragile or marginalised populations, the following recommendations should be taken into account:

Assert political commitment to achieving participation for all. Without this nothing is possible as participatory initiatives, for which society at large is seeking, are political initiatives. It is thus recommended that elected officials establish and reaffirm their orientations in this field.

Accept a change of stance. Political will is not sufficient: wanting participation is different from wanting one's projects to be improved by a participative process. For elected officials, this change in stance implies the acceptance that, if they organise a consultation, their projects will be modified. For technicians and experts, it means that they must accept that their knowledge will be examined against, and enriched, by other points of view. Thus, political will and the words that express it must be coherent with an attitude based on listening and taking into account the words elicited. This listening stance also entails accepting participants' anger, whenever it arises, when they have no other mode of expression available. Consultation methods will subsequently allow the discussion and elaboration of a shared project.

Build participative processes based on « total accessibility ». To allow the participation of all, it is recommended that participative processes should be known to all – this implies making an effort to communicate. It is also recommended to use people's own words to describe projects, or even use the languages spoken by inhabitants. This leads to the reversal of perspectives and to see beyond the simple transmission of information. It is about encouraging the appropriation of information by adapting to the ways of thinking and cultures of different publics. This implies a real change in stance for everyone, including professional participation practitioners.

Generate trust. To be effective, participative processes need evidence of trust. To provide this requires project owners to take some simple, reliable and verifiable measures which can be found at each stage of a participative process. Namely, start and finish meetings on time, produce and publish summary records in a timely manner, reply to all questions posed, clarify what is subject to discussion and what is not, etc.

Ensure everyone's participation. This implies ensuring that all possible categories of participants will be effectively informed, invited, welcomed and listened to. At each of these 4 stages, special arrangements will need to be made with regard to the most fragile and socially marginalised participants, in a perspective of «total accessibility». It is recommended that project owners facilitate the participation of the least available publics by organising discussions at times which are compatible with busy working lives or by proposing services which can facilitate participation (e.g. babysitting).

Produce knowledge. Whether they be organised for the purposes of coproduction, co-design or simply to consult the public, it is recommended that participative processes be conceived of

as production processes and, in particular, as knowledge production processes. To achieve this, different points of views on a given project should be compared (by mixing the participants), in order to enrich and render the project more intelligible. It is, in effect, through this approach of production and comparison that it will be possible to improve projects.

Organise processes and not one-off meetings. If a participative process aims to improve a project or examine an issue, participants must have the time to enter into the reflection, exchange points of view and produce collective summaries of their shared visions – or disagreements – at which they arrive. It is recommended that participative processes not be reduced to one-off meetings, except in specific cases. These processes can take time but they are necessary; they can also be planned in advance.

Conceive participative processes using gradual methods. In order to facilitate the participation of all, and notably those who are most fragile, it is recommended to plan participative processes in a gradual manner so that each person can enter into the discussion. This gradual rolling out is useful for everyone and for improving the project. Project management methods can help in this gradual conception of participative processes and allow them to be planned for.

Animate processes so that all participants can take part in the debate. Participation must be active and cannot be reduced to simple presence. It is therefore recommended to establish measures and animation that allow everyone to express themselves, exchange and debate. The timing of the debates must be organised in such a way as to allow everyone participating the chance to speak. Accompanying measures must be made available to those who have difficulty expressing themselves orally and in public.

Give everyone the means of participating. Participative processes are generally organised in a «top-down» manner by public authorities (and sometimes by companies). Only the most established and available publics can participate without forewarning; this is an advantage that other publics do not have. It is recommended that public sector bodies wishing to place public participation at the heart of their activities, should invite and assist collective structures (associations, social centres, etc.) so that they, in turn, can facilitate the participation of more marginal publics in public consultation processes.

Put participation at the heart of project owners' everyday operations. The participation of all also depends on the coherence of the processes and cohesion among project owners. It is recommended to conceive of participative processes as favouring collaboration among the various services of project owners so that all dimensions of the projects, or the questions subject to debate, may be clarified.