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Deliberative Democracy for Effective Stakeholder Engagement in Sustainability Assessment

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Abstract: In contrast to well established techniques such as Environmental Impact Assessment and Whole Life Costing which have limited focus, Sustainability Assessment has multiple dimensions and often requires the incorporation of several intangible concerns, for example environmental justice and social capital. The complex social and political dimensions of decision-making for sustainability imply that traditional methods of participation and expert-dominated decision-making may not be the most appropriate approach. It has become imperative, therefore, to shift from this mechanistic viewpoint towards more deliberative democratic and perhaps iterative processes. This paper argues that Sustainability Assessment may be considered as an opportunity to put discursive mechanisms into action, thus empowering the civil society and enhancing local decision-making. Sustainability Assessment would thus be seen less as an analytical technique and more as a forum for dialogue with the potential for serving as a basis for avoiding or handling potential conflicts. One measure of its effectiveness could be its successes in consensus building. Such interactive processes provide opportunities for the participants to share each other's values. Through their involvement in this interchange of ideas and negotiations, the participants will become aware of each other's values, which may not be so obvious at the beginning of the process, thus making it easier to align goals and objectives. This extends the purpose of the democratic process from reaching a consensus to mutual social learning. The paper argues that the innovative and context-specific solutions required for realising sustainable development can emerge from democratic deliberative processes that form part of Sustainability Assessment. These deliberative processes will evolve as the participants learn from new and innovative approaches to sustainability development and assessment.

Keywords: Stakeholder engagement, deliberative process, sustainability assessment.

Introduction

Sustainability Assessment often has an ambitious scope due to the multidimensional nature of the concept of sustainability. Sustainability seeks to address environmental, social and economic concerns. Inclusive decision-making, long-term thinking, equity are also important strands within the concept of sustainability. Sustainable development has been defined as "an ambitious new project intended to act as the focus of human endeavour in the twenty-first century" (Meadowcraft, 2000: 370). The ambitious nature of the scope might require a reconsideration of existing approaches of stakeholder involvement in decision-making.

In this context, the conventional methods of stakeholder consultations and/or engagement may not help to fulfil of the goals of Sustainability Assessment. According to Innes and Booher (2004: 419), the obligatory methods of community participation in the United States have failed because they rarely achieve genuine participation, improve decisions, satisfy the public or are sufficiently inclusive.

According to Van Driesche and Lane (2002: 150), there are three factors that influence the success of collaborative endeavours: the inclusion of unconventional knowledge including local cultural knowledge as part of the information base; the focus on understanding the different values of stakeholders rather than a focus on competing interests; and the commitment to deliberative processes rather than corporatist-style decision making. They also emphasise that the level of openness and compromise required implies that this is not an easy task. These themes and other

related aspects, and deliberative processes of stakeholder engagement are explored within this paper.

As Meppem (2000) argues, setting sustainability agenda in a normative way ignores the complexity that is inherent in the term 'sustainability'; consequently actions for sustainable development should be derived through a 'discursive community' to collectively define the strategy. The paper first explores the objectives of stakeholder engagement within sustainability assessment. Then the paper discusses the processes for planning deliberative approaches in sustainability assessment. The subsequent section summarises the key challenges in implementing such processes. The final section draws some conclusions from this analysis.

The purpose of stakeholder engagement

Public participation is based on the moral belief of democratic society that citizens should be represented in decision-making (Shepherd and Bowler, 1997: 728). This relation between participation and democratic principles is closely linked to the relationship between participation and equity. A key purpose of stakeholder engagement in Sustainability Assessment is, to empower those whom the decision may affect. Through the participation of those who are most affected, it is expected that there will be no disproportionate distribution of costs and benefits of the project. However, in order for that to take place, 'participation' of the stakeholders should lead to shared decision making rather than just a cursory form of involvement.

Sustainability Assessment should not be seen as just an analytical technique, but also as a forum for dialogue. It can then be interpreted as a deliberative democratic process. The purpose of a collaborative approach or deliberation is to arrive at consensus among the stakeholders involved (Apostolakis and Pickett, 1998). In this sense, Sustainability Assessment can also be seen as a basis for handling conflicts. It has been argued that major causes of environmental conflicts are value differences among the stakeholders (Harashima, 1995). Moreover, it can even be claimed that conflicts are inevitable (Shepherd and Bowler, 1997), as they stem from what may be interpreted as 'attitudinal differences' between the stakeholders (Awakul and Ogulana, 2002). The effectiveness of Sustainability Assessment from this perspective may thus be judged on the basis of its success in building consensus between the various stakeholders on the desirable solution taking account of the environmental, social and economic concerns to the project.

Democratic deliberation requires a multidirectional information flow between the participants. Thus, rather than focussing on reaching an outcome that satisfies the current needs of all stakeholders, which may not be achievable, such processes can be considered as opportunities to share and learn from each other's values. While interacting with others, stakeholders would learn about the different values and interests that exist, and such deliberation can be seen as mutual learning process for all the stakeholders (Harashima, 1995). Through their involvement in this interchange of ideas and negotiations, the stakeholders become aware of each others' values which may not be so obvious at the beginning of the process. During these processes, "trust and knowledge are generated and circulated, to provide a foundation of social and intellectual capital upon which collaboration can build" (Healey 1997: 247).

If, through democratic deliberation and effective stakeholder engagement, decisions are derived in accordance with the values of the local stakeholders, there will be wider acceptability of the project. Stakeholder involvement can thus encourage the widespread support and stakeholder agreement required to: legitimise sustainability initiatives; and attain the level of societal action and behavioural change necessary for their success (Irwin et al, 1994). It can also lead to an increased sense of

ownership of the project amongst those stakeholders who are most closely associated with it. The concept of sustainability promotes a "de-centered approach" which allows for context-specific solutions and (Dryzek, 1997: 199). Increased involvement of local stakeholders in the decision-making processes can also create opportunities for innovation thorough utilisation of indigenous knowledge, leading to more appropriate solutions for different situations.

The following section outlines a process which can be used to carry-out stakeholder engagement on deliberative democratic principles.

Process of engagement

One of the initial tasks in stakeholder engagement for a project should be to identify the relevant stakeholders. Stakeholders in a particular context may be "…persons, neighbourhoods, organisations, institutions, societies, and even the natural environment…" (Mitchell et. al., 1997: 855) for sustainability it should include future generations. Such a broad definition of stakeholders suggests a complex set of participants and hence requires early planning and design of engagement methods.

According to Freeman (1984), the term stakeholder refers to any group or individual who can affect or be affected. The wide scope of such a definition is highly relevant due to the practical and ethical requirements of stakeholder participation within the project process and Sustainability Assessment. After drawing up a list of stakeholders based on this definition, they should, where possible, be brought together and first asked for their opinions on whom they consider to be stakeholders in the project: a snowballing technique (Scott, 1991) should thus be adopted to identify further stakeholders.

Gregory and Keeney (1994) proposed a three stages multi-stakeholder decision making process: setting the context; specifying the objectives; and identifying alternatives. However, this approach does not adequately address the need to create to right environment that enables effective stakeholder interaction and engagement to take place. Carroll and Hendrix (1992: 350) argued that the most crucial factor in successful planning is the development of nurturing and trustful relationships based on open and sincere negotiations between all stakeholder groups. Acknowledging that identifying all potential stakeholders is not a simple task, they further argued that the managers and planners should actively seek out these groups and build trustful relationships. It follows that stakeholder engagement should be a long-term endeavour with the initial stages aimed at identifying all relevant stakeholders and building relationships through information-sharing to build credibility and trust. This would build a basic platform from where a constructive dialogue can take place. Although trust may be built throughout the process, the initial stages are particularly important in this regard because any damage early on will jeopardise any meaningful dialogue and distrustful stakeholders may choose not to participate at all.

The overall engagement process may be broadly divided into three stages: identify the relevant stakeholders and build trust upon which meaningful dialogue can be based; sharing of values in order to develop a shared set of values leading to a defined shared set of objectives; and consideration of a range of solutions aimed at delivering the objectives and arrive at consensus regarding the best solution. These stages are explained below in Figure 1.

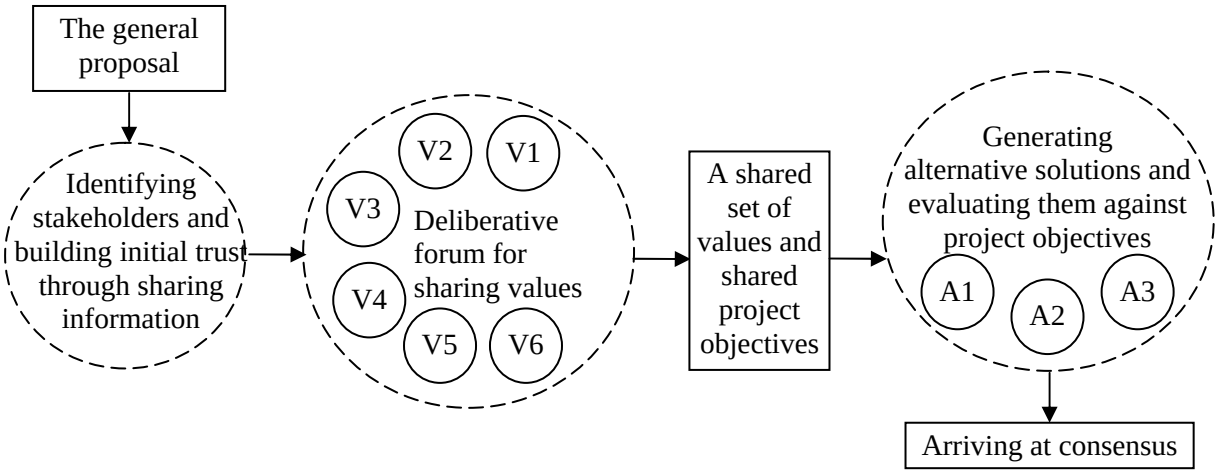

Figure 1: The deliberative process of stakeholder engagement

Democracy is about authentic communication (Dryzek, 1997: 200) and deliberative interaction, where all participants are equal and feel free to participate.

The process of stakeholder engagement should start as early as possible, rather than leaping straight into a detailed project design. The first stage should be focussed on identifying all potential stakeholders and the project proponents should start building relationships and trust with the stakeholders. The key to the creation of trust at this stage is meaningful information-sharing. The second and third stages can be seen in terms a value-focused process of engagement broadly comprising: deciding what is desired; and then figuring out the best way to achieve it (Keeney, 1992: 4). In the context of multi-stakeholder process, stakeholders share each other's values in order to define a common agenda or a shared set of objectives. The stakeholders may be asked to list their individual objectives and then explain the reasonability of those during deliberative interactive. Through learning about each others' values that shape these different objectives, the stakeholders should be encouraged to reflect upon their individual objectives and develop a common set of objectives.

Based on the collective objectives, potential should be identified. The purpose of engagement should not be merely to choose between alternatives, but to first arrive at the various alternatives and then to choose amongst them. The stakeholders should evaluate each alternative with respect to how well they achieve the agreed objectives. It may be expected that the alternatives that have been generated after the formulation of objectives will be more acceptable than the alternatives proposed before the beginning of deliberative process. Some of the main barriers or challenges that can be encountered during such a process are discussed in the following section.

Challenges to deliberative democracy

There are many barriers to achieving meaningful deliberative democratic interactions where all participants are on equal terms. These basically revolve around the issues of time constraints, inclusiveness, predetermination of outcomes, information imbalance, relative importance of different stakeholder groups and many other factors that hinder or slow down progress in this regard.

Meaningful participation from diverse stakeholder groups may require more involvement (at the right time) from stakeholders than they are prepared to invest, if they are to influence the outcome (Apostolakis and Pickett, 1998: 634). Rather than a single undertaking, deliberation requires discussion throughout the life-cycle of the sustainability assessment. Thus, time constraints can seriously undermine the real value of any dialogue.

There is also a conflict between the goals of achieving inclusiveness and employing deliberative methods. It might be difficult to achieve genuine deliberation with a very large number of participants.

If key highly influential stakeholder have no intention to make any serious changes to the project or explore alternatives based on the interaction with other stakeholders, the less influential stakeholders will become sceptical of and disillusioned with the process. Hence, if the interaction starts after the project proponents have already decided certain key aspects of the project, the real opportunity of meaningful dialogue may have already been lost and conflict resolution becomes difficult.

An imbalance of information may also be a major obstacle to such conflict resolution (Harashima, 1995). This imbalance can arise where not all of the stakeholders have equal access to the relevant information (Harashima, 1995; Sinclair and Diduck, 2000). Certain actors might be in a better position to access and also used the relevant information. This may be lead to unequal negotiations and hinder any form of consensus-building.

Since the responsibility for sustainability assessment can rest with a single stakeholder, such as the developer, this in itself poses a question on the impartiality of the process. This can lead to the situation where the process is not a negotiation and exploration of different values but rather aimed at justifying decisions already made. This imbalance of power also provides many opportunities to hide sensitive information or mislead other stakeholders through misinformation.

It is often possible that all the stakeholders in sustainability assessment do not clearly understand the meaning and purpose of the whole process. This may lead to unreasonable expectations, or conversely an assumed powerlessness in affecting decision-making or the course of events.

The participation exercise should be a substantive democratic process, where the different stakeholders are not merely provided access to information or an opportunity to express their opinions, but are put in a position to affect the decision-making. How deliberative the process is depends upon: the motivation and commitment of those involved; and the tools and techniques employed for involving the various stakeholders. However, the tools and techniques for participation do vary for different contexts determined by the type of project, the specifics of the affected communities and other stakeholders (Shepherd and Bowler, 1997).

Conclusions

Although the importance of stakeholder engagement is now a subject of platitude, the central thesis of the paper is an argument for a focus on sharing of values in sustainability assessment mechanisms. In fostering such a proposition, the paper argues in favour of deliberative democracy. The ultimate purpose of such a process it to build consensus. It is through such a deliberative democratic process that the multiple dimensions of sustainability can be addressed, conflicts avoided, equity promoted, and local decision-making enhanced, in addition to the benevolent effect of strengthening social relations.

Such a process should start early so that different alternatives can be generated and evaluated by the stakeholders. The success of such a process also depends on the creation of trust and the reflection and realignment of objectives by different stakeholders.

There are, however several challenges in the realisation of such a process. Further research is needed to reconcile the these challenges that come with the complexity of the subject matter.

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