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Where do participatory approaches meet social learning systems in the context of environmental decision making?

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Abstract

If popular environmental magazines and journals of 2005 are to be believed there has been an upsurge in participatory decision making backed up by legislation, for instance that arising from the EU's Aarhus Convention. However, there are also many critiques to be found of these participatory approaches and a range of policy makers, researchers and individual authors have suggested that in many situations where there are resource dilemmas, social learning rather than more participation is required. There are many different theories and practices of participation and social learning and some different assumptions underpinning the rationale for them. Participatory and social learning approaches are often grouped together but do they always complement each other and if so, how? What kind of participation is required to bring about social learning as part of environmental decision making? And does it help to think of social learning as systems? This paper will explore some of these questions drawing in some examples from environmental decision-making situations, mainly from the UK.

Keywords: participation, social learning, systems, environmental decision making.

Introduction

The UK ENDS report, included a feature in May 2005 entitled 'A new age of participatory decision making?' that began...

> Environmental decision-making is going through a quiet revolution. The public is having more of a say in environmental decisions, and is now consulted on everything from water abstraction to waste collection. This explosion in stakeholder engagement has required both regulators and industry to develop new skills and approaches to decision-making. But what methods are they using to try to involve the public - and how much attention do they pay to the response?

Others too have commented on a recent upsurge in public participation but as something making a comeback rather than as something new (Lane 2005). The ENDS article went on to critique participatory approaches claiming they have many actual and potential benefits but in practice they often also have difficulties, for instance those associated with transfer of power and lack of clarity of purpose, facilitation skills and resources. This kind of critique of participatory approaches is also not particularly new but European Directives such as those arising from the Aarhus Convention on Access to Information, Public Participation in Decision Making and Access to Justice in Environmental Matters and the Strategic Environmental Assessment Directive have recently started to come into effect, resulting in an increased focus on participation.

Recognition of the need for learning approaches and social learning in environmental decision making has also been gaining momentum.   There is perhaps less readily available evidence that social learning, rather than participatory approaches, has taken place though the two are of course related. (I will go on to explore how, in the final section of this paper.) Many authors and practitioners have framed the development and use of legislation such as environmental impact assessment, and schemes for environmental management systems and corporate social and environmental responsibility as a learning process. (Glasson et al 2005, McCulloch 1996, Open University 1997 and 2006). How and where a focus on social learning in the context of environmental decision making has occurred will be discussed later in this paper. First, in order to be able to consider whether and how participatory and social learning approaches complement each other, I will briefly discuss each.

Participatory approaches

What is meant by participatory approaches varies in terms of who participates in what, with whom, how and for what purpose. But many of these approaches can be linked to the idea of community participation in local governance (Woodhill 2002, Mayoux 2003, Gaventa 2004). Rose (2000) (as cited in Lane 2005) refers to a host of 'new technologies of governance' ranging through 'governance through communities' and 'Third Way' approaches (Giddens 1998) to 'public-private partnerships' unified by the need to involve citizens, non-governmental organisations and others in the development and implementation of policy.

Participatory approaches to environmental decision making and analyses of them can be traced back several decades in fields such as planning (Lane 2005), rural development (Chambers 1994) monitoring and evaluation (Mayoux 2004, UNDP 1997) and waste management (Kraft and Kraut 1985, Kraft and Clary 1991). There is a very wide diversity of these approaches, described elsewhere (e.g. Open University 1997, 2006, IEMA 2002). They are distinguished by context (e.g. rural, urban technological, action research); level of stakeholder involvement; underpinning theories (e.g. ethnographic, agroecosystems etc.) speed (e.g. rapid or longer term inquiry) and other assumptions e.g. regarding power and whether participatory approaches are facilitated in the mindset of Heron's (1989) distinctions of 'power over', 'power with' or 'power to' stakeholders. Traditionally, there was more expertise in participatory approaches in developing countries than in industrialised countries. While the quote at the start of this paper suggests that stakeholders in industrialised countries are now becoming more engaged in participating in environmental decision making, Gaventa (2004) suggests that that in the United States and parts of Europe we still have much to learn, regarding participatory approaches, from poorer countries of the world who are in the process of creating new democracies.

Much of the rationale for participatory approaches in industrialised countries appears to lie in the assumption that it can help to legitimise decision-making processes, though other perceived benefits are that it can assist by drawing in local knowledge, improve public trust and avoid delays by resolving conflicts early on (IEMA 2002). In most reviews of participatory approaches a difference between (top down) consultation and (bottom up) participation is well recognised (Open University 1997, 2006). What seems

to me less clear in some literature on participation (e.g. IEMA 2002) are the assumptions regarding epistemology (what underpinning theories of knowledge and knowing?) and teleology (what purpose or design?) Hence, whether or not facilitators and other stakeholders engage in a participatory approach to environmental decision making as a *learning* approach is sometimes open to question.

Social learning approaches

Social learning has also been considered as a mechanism of governance that may complement others (SLIM 2004) and social learning traditions can also be traced back many decades. But what was meant by social learning fifty years ago is only one of its meanings in currency today. Bandura is often credited as establishing the concept of social learning but he studied it in a traditional behavioural manner, which was prevalent in the 1950s and 60s and focused largely on learning through imitation. Danish author Knud Illeris, in his classic text on contemporary learning theory (Illeris 2002) positioned a wide range of theorists and theories in what he called 'the learning theoretical tension field between the cognitive, the emotional and the social'. Illeris identified many who had brought social and societal factors to the fore of their work and who in so doing had also in his view made contributions to learning theory. They ranged from Marx to Habermas to Wenger to Jarvis, to Giddens, Beck to many others. Examples of social learning theories, developed and used explicitly in the context of environmental decision making and sustainable development, have come from Finger and Verlaan (1995) who developed a conceptual framework for social-environmental learning, Daniels and Walker (1996) who considered collaborative learning and improving public deliberation in ecosystem-based management and Woodhill & Röling (1998) who looked into the human dimension in learning our way to more sustainable futures. This work has since been built on and there are many others who have written about social learning (e.g. Grove-White, 2005, SLIM 2004, Leeuwis and Pyburn. 2002, Finger and Asun 2001, LEARN group 2000, Wildemeersch et al 1998). Hence a very broad range of theories could be considered as theories of social learning. What constitutes a social learning approach depends not just on the questions of who learns, how, with whom and for what purpose (similar questions to those I raised regarding participatory approaches) but on how social learning is theorised.

In the context of environmental decision making, two different but overlapping social learning approaches have emerged as having a lot of potential for both policy and practice in the context of my research. The first is a process of social learning characterised by (i) convergence of goals criteria and knowledge leading to agreement on concerted action among interdependent stakeholders where (common pool) resource dilemmas have arisen, (ii) co-creation of knowledge needed to understand issues and practices and (iii) changes in behaviours, norms and procedures arising from mutual understanding of issues. This was the social learning approach that emerged from the recent EU project on social learning for the integrated management and sustainable use of water at catchment scale, the SLIM project. (SLIM 2004). It built on previous work of teams in the Netherlands, France, Italy and UK, including previous work on social learning (e.g. Woodhill and Röling 1998). The second approach I call a social learning systems approach. Systems theories were among those that informed the SLIM project, so these two approaches overlap. What is characteristic of this approach is the explicit

use of concepts from various systems traditions such as boundaries, levels, emergence, transformation, resilience and dynamics. The 'systems' dimension of social learning has been commented on by Ison et al (2000) who reviewed theoretical approaches to learning in the context of sustainable agriculture. They noted the frequent occurrence of a cybernetic paradigm in learning process approaches. Work done by people like Lance Gunderson, C.S. Holling and Carl Folke on complex adaptive systems to improve understanding of the dynamics of social-ecological systems could also be thought of as a social learning systems approach. The Open University Systems group (Open University, 1997, 2006) and Etienne Wenger (Wenger, 2000) are among those who have developed and used social learning systems approaches. Keen et al (2005) also include a systemic learning approach as one of nine principles of social learning for environmental management. Some different positions on social learning are taken by these different authors but an advantage in the explicit use of systems concepts is that it helps raise questions of what lies within a system of interest that enables it to function as a system with the purpose of learning, what lies in its environment that affects or is affected by social learning, what transformation takes place and underpinning world views. Systems approaches also offer a range of tools and methodologies to facilitate social learning (Open University 1997, 2006).

How do participatory and social learning approaches complement each other?
To address the question in the title of this paper: *Where do participatory approaches meet social learning systems in the context of environmental decision making?* UK cases of planning, managing water and wastes provide some useful examples to consider. Participatory approaches have certainly been in evidence in these domains, as can be seen from a wide range of initiatives such as workshops, focus groups, consensus conferences, 'planning for real' and citizens' juries (IEMA 2002). But while in many of these cases there is evidence of collective action, there is less evidence of long term concerted and purposeful action with social learning as an emergent property of a number of inter-related elements. That is not to say that some participatory approaches do not lead to social learning. Some authors include participation as just one facet of social learning alongside others (e.g. Keen et al 2005). Several authors have concluded that localised participatory approaches and relying on interactive emergence are not enough to bring about the kind of changes needed for sustainable development and that this will require social learning, including conducive institutions (Röling 2002, Woodhill 2002, SLIM 2004, Grove-White 2005). Röling (2002) has linked interaction and concerted action with the idea of a sustainable society, which he defines as a society based on agreements to control our own behaviour in the context of 'the eco-challenge'. He argues that "most of all a sustainable society must be capable of concerted action". Grove-White (2005) focuses on an urgent need for the cultivation of new learning capacities in policy-making and environmental and technological decision making. He also links social learning and participation in pointing to 'a new situation in which society's judgements about what courses of action will or will not prove sustainable will demand more open public discussion and negotiation.'

So, in considering participatory and social learning approaches, there appears to be a rationale for grouping them together but they are not entirely congruent. Participation might be for a different purpose than social learning and social learning requires

purposeful, rather than purposive, stakeholder participation and with potential to lead to concerted action. In this distinction arises the rationale for considering social learning as systems. The explicit use of systems ideas has been shown to help in identifying what participatory approaches achieve and could be a part of and to help to make sense of the interactions, purposes and transformations required in environmental decision making. SLIM (2004), Keen et al (2005) Blackmore (2004, 2005) and others have made a start in this direction. Wenger (2000) also has focused on the idea of participating in a social learning system noting that the perspective of a social learning system applies to many of our social institutions: our disciplines, our industries, our economic regions, and our organizations ...with implications at multiple levels (individuals, communities of practice and organisational).

Returning to the suggestion made in the ENDS report quoted at the start of this paper, that we may have a new age of participatory decision making, I wonder if and when a need for social learning will become recognised in a similar way? The evolution of social learning approaches seems to me to have had much more of a theoretical focus than participatory approaches, which in my experience have had more of a policy making and practitioner focus. The two traditions of participation and social learning have also tended to involve different communities of interest and of practice. Projects such as SLIM have started to bring theoretical, policy and practitioner focuses and participatory and social learning traditions and communities together. There appears to be a lot to be gained from continuing in this direction.

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