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Action planning to improve issues of effectiveness, representation and scale in public participation: A conference report

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Abstract

This conference report examines issues of effectiveness, representation and scale in deliberative processes by reporting on outcomes of the Participatory Approaches in Science and Technology (PATH) conference. The H-form and action planning (HAP) approach was used to guide 120 participating experts in a plenary workshop as they assessed the current state of practice and developed action plans for improving public participation in decision-making related to science and technology. The workshop outcomes highlighted the need for greater institutionalisation of participatory processes within decision-making structures and wider society, coupled with improved transparency in decision-making and increased emphasis on participatory democracy in the formal education system. Higher levels of funding and logistical support for participatory processes were also recommended, along with improvements to practice through continued innovation and testing of methods, as well as enhanced opportunities for collaborative learning from past experiences. Challenges in representing the values and views of diverse publics were identified as a central concern. The HAP approach provided a systematic way of exploring individual and collective thoughts on a complex topic as well as a means of developing ideas into practical action plans. Reflections on the benefits and shortcomings of this method are offered.

Keywords

Public participation; policy development; deliberative processes; action planning; representation; scale

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1. Introduction to the PATH project and conference

The PATH conference was held in Edinburgh in June 2006 and was organised as part of the Participatory Approaches in Science and Technology (PATH) project, funded under the European Union Framework VI Programme. The project involved a consortium of EU partners and aimed to form a network of interested parties concerned with the involvement of society in the deliberation of science-based policy issues. Academics, practitioners, policy-makers and stakeholders came together during the project to exchange knowledge and develop future directions for public participation in science and technology issues. The project focused on two persistent and ongoing challenges: scale and representation. These two cross-cutting themes were explored at a generic level, and also illustrated and analysed via three case study areas. The case study areas were selected to represent ongoing areas of debate, areas of current policy development and upcoming issues: genetically modified organisms (GMOs) in agriculture, biodiversity conservation and nanotechnology.

The PATH conference further developed the themes of the project and specifically addressed the three substantive issues of effectiveness, representation and scale in deliberative processes. 120 members of PATH network met at the conference. Their experience and expertise were harnessed during two plenary workshops, where the H-form and action planning (HAP) approach was used to structure their individual and collective thinking on the three issues. These thematic areas were derived from the objectives of the PATH project and, using input from PATH partners, were developed into specific guiding questions which conference participants explored:

- *How effectively are the public involved in policy development?*
- *How well are different values represented in participatory processes?*
- *How good are participatory methods at involving people at multiple scales?*

This paper reports on the process and outcome of the PATH conference workshop. The next section provides some background on the themes of the workshop and sets out the challenges they present. Section 3 details the two part methodology used. The outcomes are set out and then discussed in sections 4 and 5 respectively, before some conclusions made.

2. Effectiveness, representation and scale in public participation

It has been widely recognised within non-government organisation (NGO), academic and policy circles that deliberation of science-based issues is no longer the exclusive realm of politicians and experts but requires new participatory structures to enable involvement of a wide range of actors including the public

(Irwin and Wynn, 1996; Renn, 2002). In a complex society, traditional theories of democracy that suggest that elected representatives respond to their constituents' interests are now being challenged (Dryzek, 1990). Attempts at participatory deliberation have yielded insights and produced decisions that are more widely informed, but questions remain regarding how to improve the effectiveness of public participation on theoretical, methodological, practical and institutional levels. With this increasing interest in public participation, developing more effective participation is vital.

A major challenge concerns the ability of participatory processes to represent different perspectives and values. Notions of representation that are based purely on mathematical approaches are problematic as the public is not made up of homogeneous groups. Given such difficulties, issues such as who is represented currently in participatory processes and who is excluded, and the principles that should guide representation become pertinent. The need for policy development to incorporate multiple values and different perspectives has been exemplified by the controversy in Europe over the commercialisation of new technologies such as biotechnology using gene transfer (Durant et al, 1998; Tait, 2001). Considering how different values can best be included within participatory processes is a concern to many practitioners.

Another question for organisers of participatory processes is how to grapple with issues of scale. Deliberative exercises have typically involved small numbers of participants at a local level. However, there is an increasing awareness of the need to build participatory processes at regional, national and even EU levels, in order to facilitate dialogue between different groups in the formulation of science-based policies. Given the growing influences of globalisation and environmental issues that transcend national boundaries, there is a strong case to be made for scaling up participation in policy deliberation (Buttel, 1997; Smith, 2001; Bulkeley and Mol, 2003). In adapting participatory instruments for use at larger scales a range of challenges arise such as language barriers, differences in political culture and discourse traditions, and practical problems connected to facilitating useful dialogue with large numbers of participants. Several strategies have been tried in an effort to achieve deliberative democracy at larger scales, but each continues to face constraints, among them political opposition, high costs, insufficient available time and energy on behalf of the public, and difficulties in leading and sustaining such efforts (Friedman, 2006). Exploring new ways of scaling up participatory processes is therefore a continuing challenge.

3. Method

During the PATH conference two plenary sessions were designated for a two-part workshop which addressed the issues of effectiveness, representation and scale. All 120 participants were therefore involved. The participants were largely from

academic backgrounds (approximately 85), around 21 were from government type organisations such as the Scottish Executive, the Environment Agency and the European Commission, whilst another 20 participants were from NGOs, consultancies and research councils. The majority of delegates were from the European Union, but there were also several participants from the USA and Australia, and one each from Uganda and the Philippines.

The aim of the PATH plenary workshop was to develop and facilitate a process which made use of the experience and expertise of the 120 conference delegates. The H-form and action planning (HAP) method was used to encourage delegates to work together in transforming their individual and collective insights into concrete action plans for improving practice with respect to participation in policy development. This approach was adapted from the H-form developed by Guy and Inglis (1999), and extended to include an action planning element. This section details the HAP process as it was followed during the PATH workshop.

In the first part of the conference workshop (the H-form workshop), all delegates worked simultaneously in small groups to address the first thematic question on effectiveness of public participation in policy development. Afterwards, the delegates worked in parallel to examine the questions of representation and scale, with roughly half of the delegates divided into small groups dedicated to each theme.

3.1 The H-form

The H-form is a tool designed to structure participants' thinking and generate ideas around a given question. The exercise involves working in small groups to propose, discuss, sort and prioritise individual ideas following a sequence of steps. The outputs of each stage of the discussion are displayed in a designated area of a large paper template (the H-form – see Figure 1). Guy and Inglis (1999: 87) found that the H-form method

“helps individuals and/or groups record their own views and ideas in a non-threatening and open yet structured way which fosters individual expression as well as common understanding and consensus.... The sequence and clear framework that the H-form provides keeps the discussion focussed, specific and progressive.”

Briefly, the H-form activity is conducted in small groups (4-8 people) and involves 5 steps:

1. Individually considering a question and providing a score out of 10;
2. Individually writing positive and negative reasons for that score;
3. Discussing as a group the positive and negative points offered and clustering similar points;

4. Individually suggesting actions that could be taken to improve the score in future;
5. Ranking the suggested actions through voting.

Figure 1: Diagram of a completed H-form (each 'x' represents one vote)

<p>Negative reasons</p> <div style="text-align: center;"> </div>	<p>How effectively are the public involved in policy development?</p> <p>☹️ ☺️</p> <p>Not at all well Very well</p> <p>0 1 ② ③ ④ 5 ⑥ ⑦ 8 9 10</p> <p>Actions that could be taken to improve the score in future...</p> <table border="1" style="width: 100%; border-collapse: collapse;"> <tr> <td style="width: 80%;">1. <i>One suggestion</i></td> <td style="width: 20%; text-align: center;">xxx</td> </tr> <tr> <td>2. <i>Another suggestion</i></td> <td></td> </tr> <tr> <td>3. <i>Yet another suggestion</i></td> <td style="text-align: center;">x</td> </tr> <tr> <td>4. <i>And another</i></td> <td style="text-align: center;">xx</td> </tr> </table>	1. <i>One suggestion</i>	xxx	2. <i>Another suggestion</i>		3. <i>Yet another suggestion</i>	x	4. <i>And another</i>	xx	<p>Positive reasons</p> <div style="text-align: center;"> </div>
1. <i>One suggestion</i>	xxx									
2. <i>Another suggestion</i>										
3. <i>Yet another suggestion</i>	x									
4. <i>And another</i>	xx									

For the H-form stage of the PATH workshop, approximately 120 conference delegates were seated around tables and asked to work in groups of 5 or 6 according to which of the following groups they felt best reflected their role: academic, practitioner, policy maker, or “other”. Each group was given a large piece of paper with a blank H-form with the same question; various coloured pens; a commentary card; and a stack of sticky notes.

A pilot workshop held before the conference showed that the introduction explaining the scope, purpose and outputs of the session was very important. Delegates taking part in the PATH workshop were informed that by including the session in the conference the organisers wanted to:

- “practice what we preach” in a conference about participation;
- make the most of 120 people interested and experienced in participation;
- develop useful outputs for the EC funded PATH project; and
- bring a novel and relevant session to the conference.

The facilitator told the delegates they would work through an H-form to develop three issues of interest to PATH: participation in policymaking; scale and participation; and representation in participation. Going through the H-form would lead to ideas and suggestions which would be used in action planning in the second part of the workshop.

The facilitator gave a sequence of instructions while participants worked in their groups. A timer with a loud bell signalled the time limit for each task. When the timer went off, instructions for the next task were given. Participants were asked to write any concerns, assumptions and comments they had concerning the workshop on the commentary card provided.

The following instructions were given to participants:

1. Using a pen (each delegate to use a different colour), mark your individual score on the line between 0 and 10 for the question “How effectively are the public involved in policy development?” (1 minute)
2. Each individual should take 3 sticky-notes. On each, write a positive reason for your score. Why did you not give a zero score? Stick these on the right side of the paper under “Positive reasons”. (5 minutes)
3. Take 3 more sticky notes. On each write a negative reason for your score. Why did you not give the maximum possible score? Stick these on the left side of the paper under “negative reasons”. (5 minutes)
4. Each individual should read out their positive and negative reasons, without a long discussion, but clarifying the idea if necessary, to the rest of the group. Move the sticky notes around to group similar reasons. Add additional reasons if they arise. (20 minutes)
5. Consider whether your individual score has changed. Using the same coloured pen as before, mark your new score on the line between 0 and 10. Join your 2 scores with an arrow. (1 minute)
6. Each individual in turn should suggest ONE action that could be taken to improve the score in future. One person should write these actions below the centre line in a grid format with an empty box to the right. (5 minutes)
7. Each person has 3 votes. Use your votes to show which actions you think would be most effective. You can distribute your votes evenly, or cluster them in support of one action - whatever you feel shows which actions you think are most effective. (3 minutes)
8. On the table there should be a coloured sheet of paper with 2 headings. Under “Suggested Action” write the action with the most votes. Under “Why is it important?” write why that action is important. Please leave all the papers on the table. These will be used in the action planning phase of the workshop. (2 minutes)

These eight steps together with the introduction took around one hour. After a short break, delegates were asked which of two further issues they would like to discuss: scale or representation in the context of participation. Individuals were asked to sit with people who were interested in the same topic. The “scale” groups were given a blank H-form containing the question: *How good are participatory methods at involving people at multiple scales?* Meanwhile, the “representation” groups were given a blank H-form with the question: *How well are different values represented in participatory processes?*

Also on the table was a sheet with full instructions on how to complete the H-form. The groups were asked to go through the H-form at their own pace, following the same procedure as in the previous exercise, and referring to the instruction sheet. Delegates were given around 50 minutes to do this.

Once the H-form process was complete, delegates were thanked and informed of the second phase of the workshop – action planning – discussed below.

3.2 Action planning

The PATH workshop extended the H-form approach by integrating an action planning element into the process. Action planning aims to progress the outputs from a structured discussion into a practical plan of action. In order to achieve this, high-priority action ideas from the discussion are selected, similar ideas are grouped together and the participants work in small groups to discuss and elaborate the practical aspects of one action at a time.

The task for the action planning stage of the PATH workshop was to develop 3 action plans, one for each of the thematic areas of the workshop. These aimed:

1. To improve the participation of the public in developing policy;
2. To improve representation of different values and interests in participatory processes;
3. To enhance the use of participatory methods at multiple scales and levels.

Following the H-form stage of the workshop the facilitators compiled the “top” suggested action from each group (those that had received the most votes), clustered together suggestions that were similar and displayed these on large boards in the main meeting room.

When delegates undertook the action planning stage on a subsequent day of the conference, each suggested action was placed in a plastic wallet along with the answer to the question “Why is it important?” from the H-form activity. Four further sheets were included, headed: *Who* should be responsible for what, to make it happen? *How* can they do it or encourage it to happen, using what resources? *When* should it be done? How will we know when it is *done*? The wallets were distributed 3-4 on each conference table, where delegates formed small groups to work through the actions on their table in an order of their

choosing. In this way they developed answers to the strategic questions shown in Table 1.

Action	Why?	Who should do what?	How?	When?	Done!
Actions from H-form	Why is it important?	Who should be responsible for what, to make it happen?	How can they do it or encourage it to happen? Using what resources?	When should it be done?	How will we know when it is done?
1					
2					
3					
4					

Table 1: Action planning table

Once completed the sheets were stuck on the wall so that three large action planning matrices were displayed in the conference plenary, one for each issue. The outcomes of this process are discussed below.

4. Outcomes

This section presents the positive aspects, negative aspects and recommended actions that the conference delegates put forward during the H-form workshop to address each of the three guiding questions in turn. Here all of the suggested actions are considered regardless of the relative priority that the delegates later assigned to them (in contrast to section 5, where only those actions that were prioritised through group voting are considered). This summary allows us to trace the progression of thinking and identify emergent themes as they developed throughout the process.

4.1 Effectiveness

All conference delegates who took part in the H-form workshop (about 120) worked in small groups to consider the question, “how effectively are the public involved in policy development?” Delegates identified several positive signs of effective public involvement in participatory exercises, stating that participation is currently taking place (including voting), that the public has shown a strong interest in such involvement, and that participatory efforts can and do make both substantive and normative contributions to decision-making. Existing participatory methods, continued innovation in methodological development and the role of a free media were also mentioned as positive factors that encourage effective public involvement in policy development.

On the negative side, delegates noted a lack of evidence of full public involvement in decision-making in ways that transcend the electoral process.

Some felt that public interest in participation remains relatively low, and is matched by a lack of political will to involve the public. A key set of concerns was raised around substantive issues, with participants questioning how much of a difference public involvement actually makes. Some contended that the results of public involvement are not always used; policies may effectively be made before participation begins, and public involvement may be used to legitimise decisions that have already been taken. Others cited time and resource constraints, together with a lack of relevant institutional structures, as impeding the success of participatory initiatives. Finally, representation and power issues were raised, with delegates noting that some groups tend to be ignored in participatory processes, while vested interests and economic agendas can both dominate processes and skew their outcomes.

Conference delegates proposed a range of actions for improving the effectiveness of public involvement in participatory processes. With respect to the use of participatory methods, they suggested clarifying the objectives of participation, describing what constitutes good practice, making better use of information technologies (IT), and learning from past experiences. Education and shorter working hours to afford people the time and know-how to participate were proposed as strategies for institutionalising participation within society. Several delegates suggested increasing the transparency and accountability of decision-making through means such as creating rules that would oblige decision-makers to account for public will and require documentation of what factors led to particular decisions. Some delegates called for increased understanding of the resource needs of participatory processes as well as improved communication of their benefits, perhaps through celebrity involvement. Institutional changes were sought in the form of improving and clarifying the mechanisms and structures for incorporating participation into decision-making. Delegates also proposed methodological development specifically targeted at improving the representation of marginalised groups. Finally, more fundamental shifts such as changing the power structure of society and including heterodox economists within policy-making were suggested.

As noted above, these suggested actions were prioritised through voting and a smaller number were taken forward into the action planning stage of the workshop. Of the eight actions that were developed into the final action plan for improving effectiveness of public involvement in policy development, all deal with institutionalising or creating more formal structures for participation in some way. Some of these actions focus on decision-making organisations specifically and others on society more widely. However, as noted in the discussion section, delegates also expressed a desire to critically examine when participatory methods are suitable and when other approaches to decision-making may be more appropriate.

One of these recommended actions was to institutionalise participation within society through increased emphasis on civic participation in the formal education process. Three other actions addressed practical difficulties related to public involvement in policy development with the aim of making involvement easier: first by removing barriers to participation by providing increased logistical support, second by increasing incentives for participation, and third by building skills and capacity amongst organisers and decision-makers. Delegates also advocated building the skill base within policy-making organisations to understand the requirements of public participation and encourage greater use of participatory strategies within government ministries. Three other actions concerned the formal institutionalisation of participation: first by establishing an independent institution to facilitate participation, second by “converting” decision-makers to support participatory processes by addressing their fears about public involvement, and third by linking participation more closely with the policy development process through coordinated timelines and increased responsiveness to participatory outputs.

4.2 Representation

The PATH project aimed to explore how different values and interests are best mapped and represented in science-based policy formulation. In order to work toward better representation it is important to bear in mind different contexts and constraints, as well as to consider ‘silent voices’ such as children, social minorities, future generations and non-human animals (O’Neill, 2001). At the PATH conference 36 participants undertook an H-form exploration of the question, “How well are different values represented in participatory processes?” (Another small group chose to consider representation issues without following the H-form exercise by having a free-form discussion and taking notes, while a further 33 conference delegates tackled issues of scale using the H-form.)

Summarising the positive responses regarding the current state of representation, delegates stated that the benefits of multi-stakeholder processes are increasingly recognised and advocated by process organisers, decision-makers and participants alike. This view was supported by the statement that some processes have succeeded at eliciting the expression of many different values. Delegates attributed these positive examples to greater reflection about representing values on the part of process organisers, increased levels of institutional support, advances in methodological development and increased levels of public participation in such processes.

Negative aspects of the current state of representation in participatory processes that were identified include shortcomings in process design and framing, among them a lack of tools for accommodating values. Conference delegates noted that hidden values remain unaddressed within deliberative

exercises, confusion exists as to what constitutes a value, and participants may be unclear on their own values, hold complex combinations of values and experience changes in their values over time. Difficulty was identified in finding and involving all relevant actors. Participants noted that normative values tend to be undervalued relative to rational arguments due to institutional expectations. Correspondingly, it was suggested that some participants tend to dominate participatory processes while others may suppress their own views if they feel these will not be socially acceptable to the group.

The actions suggested to improve representation of values in participatory processes can be clustered around the themes of methods, substantive and practical issues. Regarding methods, delegates proposed focusing efforts on better integrating quantitative representation and qualitative differences in values, articulating values so that they can be expressed and taken into account, and incorporating opposed values. Delegates also suggested that stakeholder analysis should be conducted in a way that recognises the complexity of individual participants' positions, while recruitment should focus on values, not demographics. It was recommended that the participation of under-represented groups be promoted through education, logistical support and financial subsidies. Substantively, delegates recommended clarifying how values would be treated in participatory processes, including showing the links between facts and values and making it clear to participants how each will be counted in decision-making. Further actions suggested here include minimising the influence of the organisers' values by involving the public in framing the process as well as by making an effort to reveal the values embedded in science. In practical terms, extending the time frames of participatory initiatives, allocating more resources to them, and running multiple processes on the same issue simultaneously in order to represent more values were put forward as possible strategies for improving practice.

Eight priority actions for improving representation of values within participatory processes were selected for action planning. These indicated importance in four areas: developing methods to identify, develop and discuss values in participatory processes, ensuring that process organisers' and facilitators' values are minimised in designing and running the process, getting the 'right' people involved in the process, and finally ensuring that the outputs from participatory processes are considered during the process of policy making. However, due to constraints in the time available and the number of delegates working on the question of representation, only four actions were developed into a full action plan. The four fully developed actions focused on improving methods, minimising organisers' values, and involving an appropriate range of participants. They suggested action by a range of actors and organisations at different points in the decision-making process. As in the action plan on effectiveness outlined above, prominent specific recommendations included

increasing education related to participation, making more resources and logistical support available for participatory processes, developing improved methods and introducing participation at earlier and more timely stages of the decision-making process.

4.3 Scale

Delegates noted some positive aspects of past and ongoing attempts to carry out participatory processes at multiple scales. They acknowledged that processes to address this do exist¹ and cited increased interest in the issue of participation at multiple scales on the part of both policy-makers and researchers. Positive comments were also directed toward the flexible, diverse and adaptable nature of existing participatory methods, while continued methodological innovation and information technologies were seen to have potential to further facilitate participation at multiple levels.

On the negative side, delegates expressed that not enough large- or multiple-scale participatory exercises have been attempted to date. Problems were noted in defining and accounting for all appropriate scales, while potential was seen to exist for conflict between the outcomes derived from various scales. Some contended that it is harder to funnel the outcomes of participation into decision-making at larger scales, and that large-scale processes are less transparent and more susceptible to manipulation by dominant groups. Challenges of representation were also seen to increase at larger scales. Finally, resource limitations in the form of both money and skills were seen to hamper efforts to expand the scale of participatory exercises.

Several suggested actions for improvement focused on methods and tools. Participants recommended devoting more research and practice to trans-national, large-scale and multi-scale participatory exercises, improving the sharing of experiences through conferences and online groups in order to facilitate learning from experience, and increasing the use and testing of information technology for participatory processes across scales. As in the discussions on involvement and representation, delegates proposed that potential participants be motivated through education and action for participatory democracy, beginning in schools. Further suggestions concerned increasing the transparency and accountability of decision-making, increasing the funding and resources available to participatory processes, and increasing institutional support for, experimentation with and communication about multi-scale participation.

¹ Although specific examples were not named in the course of the H-form exercise, some of the delegates were professionally involved with large-scale deliberative processes that may have provided the basis for these statements, including Meeting of Minds: European Citizens' Deliberation on Brain Science (<http://www.meetingmindseurope.org>) and America Speaks (<http://www.americaspeaks.org>).

Nine actions were prioritised for action planning, spanning a similar range of topics as the actions on effectiveness and representation. Once again, motivating the public through education about participation was put forward, as was increasing the level of resources allocated to participatory processes at multiple scales. Increasing the accountability of representatives was another recurring theme. As with the question on representation, only four of these suggested actions were fully developed into action plans that specified the recommended activities, actors, time frames and measures that could indicate successful completion. These four actions were strongly focused on the goal of improving participatory practice at multiple scales through research, methodological development and communication of learning through networks. In particular, delegates recommended further research and experimentation to explore the potential of information technologies to facilitate multi-scale participation. Notably, one action point concerned assessing when participatory methods are most effective and when other strategies may be more appropriate.

5. Discussion

Two main topics will be considered here: the results of the HAP process and reflections on some benefits and limitations of the HAP method as it was used in the PATH workshop.

5.1 Building on the workshop outcomes

Considering the outcomes of the HAP workshop that were summarised in the preceding section, several common themes recurred across the discussions on the original questions concerning effectiveness, representation and scale. First, delegates stressed the need for greater institutionalisation of participation within formal decision-making structures and in broader society. Second, high priority was given to the importance of education in promoting public participation. Third, delegates addressing all three thematic questions spoke to the limitations on participatory processes that are imposed by resource constraints. Additional recommendations that recurred across topics were to continue with innovation and testing of methods, create and expand opportunities to share learning from past experiences, and improve accountability and transparency in decision-making in order to clarify the links between public input and eventual outcomes. Further, shortcomings in representing diverse participants and views were identified as areas for improvement in the discussions on both effectiveness and scale; therefore representation issues can be considered a central concern for improving practice in participatory processes.

Table 2 presents overlapping priority actions that were identified in the H-form activities for at least two of the three overall guiding questions. In this summary, all of the actions that were nominated for action planning were

included, regardless of whether or not they were eventually developed into full action plans. This means that each of the actions in Table 2 was identified (through voting) as a top priority within at least two small groups of delegates who were discussing at least two different topics. Many of these ideas were elaborated into action plans, but some were not. Given the time constraints, smaller number of delegates who were available to take part in the action planning workshop and random distribution of suggested actions among the groups that were present, we take the position here that it would be unfair to consider the (already prioritised) actions that were turned into action plans to have been selected through a second round of prioritisation that truly represented the views of the delegates. However, the combination of nomination by voting within the original (H-form) groups and the recurrence of these recommendations across topics provides sufficient justification to consider them the solid core of an action plan for improving the overall effectiveness, representation and treatment of scale issues in deliberative processes.

Theme	Priority action
Methods	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Evaluate existing methods to identify what works in a range of situations (2) - Clarify conditions under which participatory approaches are and are not appropriate (2) - Explore potential contributions of IT (2) - Continue with innovation and experimentation to improve methods (2) - Enhance learning from, and sharing of, past experiences (2)
Encouraging involvement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Institutionalise participation in society through education in schools (3) - Remove barriers and increase incentives for participation by increasing logistical support and financial subsidies (2) - Focus on involving under-represented groups (2)
Substantive aspects	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Increase transparency by documenting factors that lead to policy decisions (3) - Increase accountability by obliging decision-makers to account for public will (2) - Clarify objectives of participation and how participants' values will be treated in process (2)
Practical aspects	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Increase funding and resources for participatory processes (2) - Include the public at earlier stages of the process and involve them in framing the issues (2)
Institutional aspects	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Improve and clarify mechanisms and structures for institutionalising participation in decision-making (3)

Table 2: Priority actions merged across the questions of effectiveness, representation and scale (number in parentheses indicates the number of categories in which the action was raised)

The extent of overlap among these actions suggests that concentrating resources and efforts on the actions that were raised across two or three areas would yield multiple benefits in terms of improving the practice of public participation in policy development by addressing several issues at once.

It is worth noting two alternative views to those in Table 1 that were also prioritised for action planning (though they did not recur across more than one theme). First, one group of delegates maintained that using persuasion (e.g. through dialogue, lobbying or presentation of good examples) and capacity building would be a more effective way to increase policy makers' receptiveness to participatory approaches than formally obliging them to meet new requirements, whether through laws or guidelines. Second, some delegates disagreed with the goal of establishing what constitutes "good" or "best" practice with respect to participatory processes, arguing that such processes are too context-specific to come up with what might be interpreted as a universal formula for their success.

A striking feature of the action planning exercise was the delegates' sense of urgency. For nearly all of the recommendations that were elaborated into action plans, their group responses to the question, "*When* should it be done?" were either "now" or "as soon as possible". This speaks both to a strong desire for prompt action to improve practice in the rapidly developing field of participation in policy development and, given the levels of momentum and inertia that exist within governance institutions (particularly at large scales), the perception that early action is crucial in order to start what could be a long-term process of achieving systemic change.

Considering the question of how to measure progress toward accomplishing the proposed actions, delegates suggested several types of indicators that could signal whether or not the actions have been achieved in the future. These ranged from changes in the perceptions of actors involved in all aspects of participatory processes (participants, organisers and decision-makers) to more concrete outcomes such as changes in funding patterns, documentation that policy decisions have made use of public input, and the establishment of new institutions.

In order for these recommendations to move forward they must first reach various groups of key actors. These include academics and researchers as well as policy-makers, practitioners, civil society leaders and other stakeholders. Since this report is most likely to reach academics and researchers, here we consider which priority actions are most likely to be applicable to those who identify themselves with those roles (acknowledging that many people hold multiple roles). Academics and researchers are in a particularly good position to contribute to the realisation of priority actions for improving participatory deliberative processes in the following ways:

1. Methodological development (particularly theoretical development, evaluation of existing methods, and appraisal of situations in which participation is appropriate vs. when other approaches might work better);

2. Research into who is under-represented and why;
3. Active participation in networks, conferences and online groups to promote learning from past experiences;
4. For those within educational institutions, incorporation of deliberative democracy into classroom teaching and/ or curriculum development; and
5. Formation of partnerships in efforts to institutionalise participation within decision-making institutions and structures.

5.2 Reflections on the HAP approach

The HAP method provided a systematic way of exploring and progressing ideas for improving practice. Its emphasis on encouraging delegates to identify both strengths and weaknesses in current practice before recommending actions for change served to promote balanced thinking that was critical without being overly negative, as well as to suggest improvements that build on an awareness of strengths and resources that already exist. The guiding questions were provided to the groups, but the themes that have been used to cluster and discuss their ideas above emerged from the delegates' own responses and recommendations. That there was consistency in these emergent categories for the three aspects of each question (positive reasons, negative reasons and suggested actions) and across the three questions (effectiveness, representation and scale) suggests that different groups of participants identified similar priorities for improvement, even when considering different aspects of participation. However, as noted above there was still some diversity in strategic viewpoints represented in the final action plans.

One could conclude from this that the HAP approach created space for broad thinking across categories, enabling recommendations that had a degree of continuity without being uniform. However, it is also possible that HAP allowed or enabled some views to be expressed and not others. For example, delegates may have held back from voicing their full opinions if they suspected their statements would be unpopular with other group members, or if their personal views differed from the official position of the organisation they officially represented. It is difficult to take note of what was not said.

The H-forms did not produce consensus, either within or among the many small groups that took part in the workshop. Actions suggested by individuals were prioritised by a voting scheme in which each group member was allowed a certain number of votes to allocate however s/he wished (i.e. the votes could all be clustered on one idea to represent a strong opinion, or spread out between multiple actions). The actions that received the most votes were taken forward into the action planning stage. The proposed actions were not reworked by the groups to reflect collective opinion, nor necessarily supported (or in some cases, understood) by the members of a different small group who worked out the action plan for the idea. Thus, although several participants had to "approve" a proposed

action in order to see its action plan through to completion, there was little recourse for those who may have wished to expand, nuance or alter these individually-authored suggestions at any point in the process. (The completed H-forms were displayed during a lunch break so that participants could peruse each other's work and comment on others' ideas, but this was not a formal iterative step in the process.)

Given the time constraints under which the action plans were produced and the lack of formal evaluation and revision of the plans by the larger group, likewise the final action plans cannot be considered the consensus or even majority view of the 120 conference participants. Rather, they reflect a partial working-through of many recommendations that were identified and prioritised through the earlier H-form stage of the workshop. Finding a way to provide greater opportunity for comment and revision would represent one possible improvement to the HAP approach.

A further critique of the HAP method as it was used in the workshop concerns whether the 'right' questions were asked. Several participants lamented the broad scope of the questions and the fact that key words could be interpreted in multiple ways. The questions that were used were developed through consultation with several PATH partners, but not all of the delegates were invited to take part in their formulation. While it would have represented a major undertaking to ask such a large number of participants to generate and agree on questions for discussion during the workshop itself, nevertheless a higher level of participant input could have been solicited by the organisers when designing the workshop. Indeed, this would have satisfied one of the priority actions that emerged from the workshop itself – to involve participants earlier in the process and include their input in framing the issues to be discussed!

In summary, the H-form and action planning method proved to be a useful tool for structuring discussion and generating ideas related to three complex aspects of participatory processes. Modifications to the process could be made to improve the formulation of questions, allow more in-depth work on the action plans and provide greater opportunity for participants to review and perhaps revise each other's ideas, thus moving toward a more collective output.

6. Conclusions

The 120 PATH conference delegates who contributed to this assessment represented a range of backgrounds and affiliations including policy developers, researchers and practitioners, each with a strong history of involvement in participatory processes. Combining their insights, action priorities were identified for improving practice in participatory approaches to policy development. First, researchers and practitioners should devote efforts to further methodological development, evaluation and sharing of experiences. Second, public institutions

should encourage greater public involvement through increased education, incentives and focus on under-represented groups. Third, governments and process organisers should substantively improve transparency and accountability by clarifying and strengthening the links between public participation and eventual decisions. Fourth, budget controllers should be persuaded of the value of meaningful public involvement in participatory exercises, and made aware that higher levels of funding and logistical support than have been allocated to date are needed in order to achieve this. Finally, institutional development is needed in clarifying and improving the structures and mechanisms that enable effective participation.

Academics and researchers can and should give particular thought to the contribution they could make toward meeting these objectives, and thereby improve the effectiveness and representation of public involvement in policy development at different scales. Performing methodological research and development, researching representation issues, participating in networks designed to share learning and forming partnerships to promote institutionalisation of participation represent particular opportunities in this regard.

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