

Stakeholder e-Participation in Local Planning: The Camargue Park Case

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Abstract. The goal of this study is to evaluate several features and outcomes of the e-consultation organized by the Camargue Natural Park on its management plan. To estimate the benefits of the selected Internet devices, we have compared our assessment of this e-consultation with other face-to-face participative events organized on the same management plan. Following “computer-mediated communication” and deliberative theories, we expected that the tested e-tools would increase the deliberative features of the stakeholder participation. Several economic and organisational benefits were also expected. Our first results confirm the organisational benefits of this e-consultation (information gain, cost of the process, etc.). Several “deliberative” benefits have also been observed (more opinion and thematic diversity without an increase of “flames”). Nevertheless, speech is apparently more concentrated than in face-to-face events, even if many “non-posters” visited the consultation site but did not post because they had “all their comments already included”.

Keywords: e-participation, e-deliberation, stakeholder, local government, planning, influence on decision, speech equality, inclusion.

1 Introduction

As descriptive research on public participation grows, so does the question of the impact of institutional and interface designs on public participation quality and impact. This question has already guided various researches comparing different types of face-to-face debates [1], [4], [16], different online devices [5], [19], [21] or face-to-face vs. online debate designs [10], [13], [14]. The variations observed can be related to the actual process of debates or their outcomes. The quality of the process is often measured by the representativeness of the participants, the equality of expression or the cost of the participative event. Outcomes or “impact” variables go from political knowledge to social trust gains and from argument repertoire to influence on actual policy decision. In the case of local planning processes, public participation is encouraged by laws and treaties at National and International scale (e.g. Aarhus convention). But participation is usually limited to selected professional stakeholders and experts in a few thematic meetings, [1], [8], [11]. Even when sponsors and managers

want to widen the participation, they have to overcome many barriers (long procedures, complex documents, important organizational costs, etc.). In this context, which electronic tools can facilitate a wider, more “deliberative” and less expensive participation in such planning processes?

To answer this question, the Intermed project (2008-2011, funded by the French National Research Agency) aims at designing Internet tools and testing their potential benefits for local planning debate. These tests use case-study, comparative and experimental designs. In this paper we will present a study of the e-consultation organized by the Camargue Park on its management plan. The goal of this study is to evaluate several features and outcomes of this e-consultation. To estimate the benefits of the selected Internet device, we will compare our assessment of this e-consultation with other face-to-face participative events organized on the same management plan. More deliberative debates (inclusive, equal, diverse, etc.), a more equal influence on decision and several economic benefits for organizers are expected.

After a short discussion on Internet potential benefits for this type of debate (2), we will describe the context and the tools used for this e-consultation (3). Then we will precise the evaluation design of our study (4) and present the first results of our assessment (5). In the conclusion the limits and further directions of our research are discussed.

2 Internet Potential for Participation in Local Planning

Local planning processes evaluations are not frequent, but general features and challenges can be described (2.1.). For this type of public participation, Internet devices could have many potential benefits and less pitfalls than in general (2.2).

2.1 Public Participation in Local Planning

Compared to “deliberative events” like deliberative polls or consensus conferences [7], local planning debates have generally several institutional features that don’t facilitate public participation. The procedures are long (3 to 6 years from diagnosis to policy plan), the texts are over 100 pages, the themes are complex, uncertainty is high and sponsors and organizers have limited resources. Thus, small group moderated and informed deliberation between “lay” participants is difficult to organize, except with large findings [9].

Given these “institutional features” and political routines, only a few “expert” stakeholders generally participate to planning processes in thematic meetings in France [11], in other EU countries [8], or in the USA [1]. The participation of most of stakeholders and citizens is then limited to meeting attendance or uninformed answers to polls [1], [6]. If “lay citizen” participation faces numerous barriers, the participation of a large part of the stakeholders is still problematic for many local governments. The main challenges for this type of policy making processes are generally:

- The implication of the maximum of stakeholders in the process in order to avoid potential conflicts and further contestations during the implementation phase
- A facilitated information gathering on the different issues faced by the diverse groups of inhabitants, workers and businesses of the district

- An increased awareness and knowledge of the urban and environmental issues of the district by their inhabitants
- Limited organisational and financial costs linked to the participation process and its synthesis at each step of the decision

In this context, what is the potential of e-participation to planning process? More precisely, which electronic tools can facilitate a wider, more “deliberative” and less expensive stakeholder participation to these planning processes?

2.2 Internet Potential for Local Planning Participation

The main potential benefit of Internet for public participation in general is its impact on organisational and financial costs. If managers and participants can save time and money, participation events are expected to be more frequent, interactive and representative [10]. More generally, if information and expression on public issues takes less time for participants, they should probably participate more, especially if they are not “professional stakeholders” [6].

Beyond “cost” factors, some Internet interface features may facilitate more inclusive, interactive and equal debates. According to many experiments in “Computer-Mediated Communication studies”, usual features of online interfaces (lack of status indication, asynchronous and written communication, physical distance, etc.) enhance the equality and diversity of expression in group discussions [12], [18]. Some large experiments or observations have since confirmed these results [2], [14], [15]. Thus, in stakeholder consultations, Internet tools could facilitate the expression of the less “experts” in the topics discussed (and more generally in oral expression) and then lead to more informed, legitimated and accepted decisions.

One of the most frequent pitfalls of online debates is the high proportion of flames generally observed in online political discussion [3]. Moderation devices and practices can reduce this problem [2], [21] but their cost is high when the targeted level of participation is high. Moreover, these tools can also decrease participation rates or the level of perceived fairness of a public debate when confidence between citizens and government is low or when the moderation rules are vague [19], [20]. In stakeholder consultations moderation problems could be less important: the participants are not anonymous and they also meet in face-to-face meetings. Indeed, the potential benefits of e-tools for a class of public debate vary according to its institutional features and specific goals [17].

3 Context and Tools of Camargue e-Consultation

The studied e-consultation is one of the last “participative event” in a long process run by the Camargue “Regional natural park” on its management plan (3.1) Given the institutional features of this participative event and its context, a specific electronic design has been proposed to the Camargue Park government (3.2)

3.1 Institutional and Social Context of the Camargue e-Consultation

Camargue County is a coastal Regional natural park located in the south of France. Like every park it legally has to adopt a management plan. This plan must define the

main goals and policies for the protection and the sustainable development of the concerned area. More limitations are possible, especially about business or infrastructures allowed in the Park area. These plans are legally superior and directly influence most of the policy choices made at the local scale. For instance, every urban planning document must be conformed to the park management plan. Like most of the local planning processes, the Camargue process is very long: it began in 2005 and it is supposed to end in 2010. At each step of the planning process, different types of public participation have been organized, generally with the same group of stakeholders. At the end of each step, an outline of the “public” proposals is produced by the managers of the park and then given to the park representatives for an “official validation”. At the end of the process, local representatives and national government will finally adopt (or do not adopt) the co-written document (Cf. Table 1).

Table 1. Camargue Park management plan process

Steps	Participation
Area diagnosis (05-06/2006)	A few national and local governments experts and selected stakeholders
General goals (09/2006-06/2007)	A phone poll (250 participants) and 20 public meetings (300 participants)
Management plan “elaboration” (12/2006-07/2007)	40 thematic workshops (5 themes x 8 meetings) with approximately 100 stakeholders invited
Management plan “precision” (10/2008-03/2009)	16 thematic workshops and one global meeting with approximately the same stakeholders E-consultation of around 90 stakeholders
Management plan “validation” (Summer 2009-End of 2010)	“Public consultation” Local and National governments vote

The step of the process mainly concerned by our evaluation is the e-consultation of around 90 stakeholders (that began on 22 January 2009 and ended on 28 February 2009) who have been invited by mail and email to give their opinion and debate on the management plan project before the beginning of the “validation phase”.

3.2 e-Tools for Costless and More Deliberative Planning Debate

Given the main institutional features and goals of planning debate between stakeholders, the Internet device tested was a website with an annotation tool, a controlled login and a “slight” moderation. The invited participants could read the management plan (one page for each of the 20 chapters), select any part of the text and comment it with no expression or size restriction. All the invited participants were able to read all the annotations and know who wrote it and when. They could also visualize to which part of the text the annotation were referring (Cf. Figure 1). The debates were not moderated; the participants were just warned that different type of “illegal” messages could be suppressed by a moderator.

1.4. Améliorer la qualité des eaux et des milieux aquatiques

Mettre en place d'un réseau de surveillance de la qualité des eaux

En application de la Directive Cadre sur l'Eau (DCE) visant le « Bon état écologique » des milieux aquatiques, l'état des lieux du Bassin du Rhône, adopté par le comité de Bassin le 04 mars 2005, définit les masses d'eau suivantes sur le territoire du Parc :

- o 3 masses d'eau pour le Rhône : Le Petit et Grand Rhône jusqu'à la limite de remontées des eaux salées, le Rhône de Beaucaire à la Méditerranée.
- o 2 masses d'eau littorale : le littoral au droit du delta et le Golfe de Fos,
- o 6 systèmes lagunaires : complexe Vaccarès, marais périphériques, la Pelissade, les Salins de Giraud, les Salins d'Aigues-Mortes, le complexe Fourneau Cabri,
- o 1 nappe d'eau souterraine : les limons et alluvions du Bas Rhône (Camargue).

L'une des principales pressions évoquées est la déstabilisation des équilibres actuels par l'intensification des pratiques agricoles, touristiques ou industrielles, qui pourrait à terme entraîner une banalisation, voire une dégradation des milieux.

ARPE a fait une annotation le Tue Feb 24 2009 20:36:00 GMT+0100
Mettre en place un réseau de surveillance de la qualité des eaux

Departement 13 a fait une annotation le Mon Jan 26 2009 15:39:00 GMT+0100 :

SM Pallazola a fait une annotation le Mon Feb 23 2009 15:36:00 GMT+0100 :

Il n'est nul part fait référence au réseau de surveillance DCE lui même. Qu'en est-il de son articulation avec les préconisations faites ci-dessous ?

ARPE a fait une annotation le Tue Feb 24 2009 20:27:00 GMT+0100.

Définir de mettre la référence article Directive 2000/60/CE du Parlement européen et du Conseil du 23 octobre 2000 établissant un cadre pour une politique communautaire dans le domaine de l'eau

TDValat a fait une annotation le Thu Feb 19 2009 11:13:00 GMT+0100.

Lagunaires et zones humides associées (les marais périphériques ne sont pas des lagunes)

Fig. 1. E-consultation tool screenshot

This type of annotation tool was supposed to entice the participants to read the different parts of the planning document and select the sections or proposals they wanted to comment. This possibility is particularly important for local planning processes in which the documents discussed are generally over 100 pages long. To collect complex information and evaluations of stakeholders, free flow text has been preferred to poll, although a form of pre-structured expression has been suggested: participants were asked to precise if their message was a comment or a modification proposal.

The controlled and identifying type of login (e.g. “Asso_camarguais” for “Association des camarguais”) has been chosen to create accountability and limit the need for moderation. A systematic pre or post-moderation is too expensive for this type of local government, especially if the level of participation becomes high. Moreover, censorship could have a negative impact on trust and dissuade some stakeholders to continue their participation to these long and complex planning processes.

4 Evaluation Design of the e-Consultation Features and Outcomes

In order to test several hypotheses about the benefits of e-tools for stakeholder participation (4.1) we have analyzed several process features and outcomes of the Camargue e-consultation and compared them to similar face-to-face participation processes (4.2).

4.1 Hypotheses

We expected that this stakeholder e-consultation should have several benefits compared to the usual features of the Camargue Park workshops. The definition of these “process” and “outcome” benefits refers to previous research on public participation [1], [2], [15], [16].

First, given the limited cost of moderation, economic and organisational benefits of this Internet tool for this type of consultation will be confirmed:

- if its cost (preparation, moderation, processing) is inferior to the usual cost of a comparable face-to-face consultation

- if the organizers are satisfied with the participation rate and with the type and quantity of information and opinions gathered
- and if the proportion of “flames” [3] is not very different from the moderated face-to-face workshops

Second, according to many results in “Computer-mediated Communication” studies [12], [18], this e-consultation event is expected to:

- decrease the concentration of speech vs. comparable face-to-face debates (% of speech time for each participant and type of participant)
- increase the expression of disagreement and the diversity of speech acts produced
- decrease the “thematic specialization” of the participants (% of questions and part of the plan discussed by each participant and type of participant)

Finally, if these process features are observed (with a low level of flaming), deliberative theories [5] predict

- an increased perception of satisfaction and competence gain by the participants
- and more influence on decision by “weak” stakeholders (who participate and speak less than the “expert” or “professional” stakeholders in face-to-face workshops).

4.2 Evaluation Design

To test our hypotheses, we have used several methodological tools (face-to-face interviews, phone poll, workshops proceedings analysis) to collect data on two set of face-to-face workshops that could be compared to the e-consultation (the 40 thematic meetings organized between December 2006 and July 2007 and the 16 thematic meetings organized between October and December 2008). During these workshops, approximately the same stakeholders were invited to debate about the main policies to adopt in the management plan. First, we interviewed the organizers and main “moderators” of the process in order to collect:

- their estimation of the 3 processes general “cost” (preparation, moderation, outline)
- their assessment of the workshops main features (concentration of speech, proportion of disagreements and “flames”, themes discussed)
- their level of satisfaction with the type and quantity of the information and opinions gathered (in the three processes)
- and their estimation of the different stakeholders’ influence on decision

We also analyzed the workshops proceedings to assess more precisely the participation rate of each type of participants (National or local government agency expert, local government representative, business lobby, local association) in each thematic meeting.

The e-consultation process features (concentration of speech, proportion of flames, etc.) have been analyzed “directly” on the participation data collected online (text of the annotation, text annotated, author, etc.)

Finally, we interviewed a large part of the invited stakeholders in order to collect data on their practices (previous participations, use of Internet) on their assessment of the e-consultation and on the reasons why they did or did not post messages.

5 First Results

Given the limited cost of this non-moderated e-consultation, economic and organisational benefits of this “basic” Internet tool are confirmed, at least for this type of consultation. As shown in table 2, many additional comments, proposals and form corrections have been collected (630 posts, 20 450 words) with a limited cost and without a flame increase. Moreover, the organizers of the process emphasized that the annotation system induced the posters to “locate” their comment in the text and thus allowed an easier “integration process” (i.e. the political discussion of what proposal should be integrated in the plan with which wording).

Table 2. Face-to-face vs online consultations “organisational costs and benefits”

	Face-to-Face workshops		E-consultation of February 2009
	2007	2008	
Participation	51 participants M=14 part./ meeting	52 participants M=7 part./ meeting	90 invited-52 visitors 20 posters-630 posts
Information and opinions gathered	List of goals and possible policies (very vague)	More precisions and commitments by lobbies (hunters, etc.)	Additional policy proposals and form corrections
Proportion of flames	Very few (?)	Very few (?)	Very few (2) by the main Park opponent
Estimated cost of the process	30 000 euros	15 000 euros	5 000 euros

Concerning the deliberative features, three hypotheses have been tested only approximately: distribution of speech, level of disagreement and diversity of speech. Indeed, the data collected on face-to-face events were mainly based on managers’ memories. Nevertheless, it seems clear that the e-consultation did not facilitate speech equality: only 20 stakeholders have posted at least one annotation and the 10 most active posted 88% of the messages (Cf. table 3). On the contrary, more disagreements have been expressed online and the thematic specialization has significantly been reduced. As expected, participants widely used the possibility they had to comment the different parts of the management plan (although only local government representatives and a few “professional” stakeholders managed to participate to several thematic workshops during the face-to-face processes).

Although not complete yet, the interviews of the invited stakeholders (90) give already some interesting results. Almost all the interviewed (41) have visited the consultation site at least one time, even the “non-posters” (28). Concerning the interviewed stakeholders who read at least several posts (17), 65% found the debate interesting and diverse and a majority claim that they have learned about the management plan (59%) and about the other participants’ opinions (53%). The main reason for non-posting is the “lack of time” (43%). More interestingly, some stakeholders did not post because their opinion was “already included in the plan” (21%). Seven stakeholders printed the plan

to annotate it in an “internal meeting” and sent it by mail (mostly “big” agencies and lobbies). Only 11% of the non-posters claimed that their Internet access or the web site usability were a barrier. But at least 4 posters apparently lost a few messages and found the web site not enough usable.

Table 3. Face-to-face vs online consultations “deliberative features”

	Face-to-Face workshops		E-consultation of February 2009
	2007	2008	
Who attended?	18 Agency Experts 7 Local Gov. 14 Lobbies 12 Associations (at least 1 meeting/40)	16 Agency Experts 7 Local Gov. 18 Lobbies 7 Associations (at least 1 meeting/16)	5 Agency Experts 6 Local Gov 3 Lobbies 6 Associations (at least 1 post)
Distribution of speech?	Relatively equal (?)	Dominance of a few (?)	Dominance of a few (88% of posts by 10 most active)
Thematic specialization	Most of participants confined to one theme	Most of participants confined to one theme	90% of posters talk about most of the themes
Disagreements	Very rare (except on one “bridge or not bridge” issue)	Rare (One workshop per type of activity)	25% of messages disagree on content

6 Conclusion

To estimate the benefits of the “Camargue management plan” e-consultation, we have compared our assessment of this e-governance process with other face-to-face participative processes organized on the same plan. Following “computer-mediated communication” and deliberative theories, we expected that the tested e-tools would increase the deliberative features of stakeholder participation with several economic and organizational benefits. Our first results confirm most of the expected organizational benefits: many additional policy proposals and form corrections have been collected with a limited cost and without an increase of flames. Several “deliberative” benefits have also been observed (more diverse opinions without an increase of flames and knowledge gains for participants). Inversely, speech is apparently more concentrated than in face-to-face events, even if many “non-posters” did not post because they had “all their comments already included”.

Concerning the influence on decision, it is too soon to analyze the impact of this e-consultation. Yet, according to the process managers, almost all the proposals precisely formulated have been included in the new draft of the management plan. These proposals were generally about “personal” commitment that a given stakeholder made

previously and then wanted to modify. But “common” goals and policy proposals have also been included if any explicit disagreement was expressed by other participants (except if the disagreements were expressed by the two main opponents of the park: a local government and an inhabitant association). Further “textual” comparisons between drafts of the plan and posts of the participants have to be done to check these claims.

Although our assessment is not complete, it seems likely that the “basic” Internet tool proposed had several benefits. For this type of consultation a moderation tool is not useful and polls would have decrease the information gain for organizers. Still, several improvements of the e-tool usability are possible and have been asked by participants. Moreover, cartographic or multi-criteria decision supports could probably enhance participation and deliberative features. Nevertheless, the main barriers to a wider and more deliberative participative e-governance are clearly “institutional”. For instance, the length, complexity and vagueness of the management plan were probably the main barrier for most of the non-participants.

In further assessments of this type of participative e-governance process, several methodological barriers should be overcome. First, direct observation of similar face-to-face events could improve the comparison of speech concentration and disagreement expression. Second, consultation processes in which face-to-face meetings are organized in parallel with online consultations on the same topic, though rare would be more interesting to study. Finally, our knowledge of e-tools effectiveness for public participation processes would above all be improved by comparative studies between processes using different e-tools in similar institutional and social contexts.

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