

How does sustainability get into participation processes?

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Version 1.0 - Vienna, June 2011



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For more than 20 years the target of sustainability has been the central political concept for developing society and the environment so that both have a future. In 1987 the Brundtland Report defined sustainable development as “development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. [...] Thus the goals of economic and social development must be defined in terms of sustainability in all countries - developed or developing, market-oriented or centrally planned.”¹ In the years that followed the target of sustainability was developed further into a number of concepts with differing emphases, and fleshed out both in the political arena and in the scientific community.²

Today key aspects of sustainability are to be found in innumerable statements of policy and strategies at the national and international level, such as the Rio Declaration and Local Agenda 21 (1992), the Charter of Aalborg (1994), the Aarhus Convention (1998), the EU Water Framework Directive (2000) and the EU Strategy for Sustainable Development (2006). In Austria a nationwide sustainability strategy (NSTRAT) was adopted by Parliament for the first time in 2002, and supplemented by the Federation and Provinces' all-Austrian sustainability strategy (ÖSTRAT) in 2010. In addition, specific programs for sustainability have been developed at province and community level.

With the target in place in a whole series of political programs and official policies, sustainability goals gain in importance for participation processes. In conjunction with other directives (statutes, administrative orders, mission statements) the goals of and criteria for sustainable development point in a specific direction and stake out the scope for negotiation and decision within participation processes. Even if many of the directives and goals in question are purely for guidance, it is vital to take them into account in participation processes, in order to obtain outcomes that contribute to sustainable development.

Below ways of shaping participation to take the various aspects of sustainability into full account are presented.

¹ World Commission on Environment and Development (the Brundtland Commission): Our Common Future, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987

² Further information on the current discussion on sustainable development can be found on the websites of the following institutions: International Institute for Sustainable Development: <http://www.iisd.org/sd/>

1. Draw attention to the project's possible consequences

Keep the wider context in mind

Right at the start of preparing a participation process one ought to find out how far sustainability goals and/or policies already in action are relevant to the project. The next step is to analyse the current setting for the project and roughly assess its likely ecological, economic and social effects – in the short and longer term.

It should be noted that current economic problems usually carry more weight in decision-making than social or long-term ecological goals, and local and regional effects more than those in other countries and continents. Again, in practice the interests of the groups directly involved in participation usually carry more weight than those of others who should also be kept in mind from the standpoint of sustainability; this applies to the effects of decisions taken today on future generations and/or on other countries and continents.

Carry out sustainability checks

A variety of **sustainability checks exist for different topics** and areas of responsibility (e.g. in the fields of regional development, implementing the Local Agenda 21, working out energy strategies)³. Using them can help to accommodate as many aspects of sustainability as possible in the participation process. Checklists can also reveal what, say, global responsibility and the precautionary principle can signify in the particular project context. Even where the people organizing the participation process could perform the **sustainability check** alone, it turns out to be well worth involving the stakeholders in the check; this not only encourages people to give more attention to the basic goals of sustainability, but is also a way to tie relatively abstract aims in with the specific situation on the spot. It also makes it easier to achieve a compromise between several aspects in cases where the participants express diverging views and interests.

These checks can be employed at various stages of the process, e.g. at the start for orientation, as an aid during the process and/or as a monitoring device after completion. The Annex below lists various sustainability checks and sets of indicators for different fields (e.g. Local Agenda 21, community and regional development, firms etc.) that can help in getting one's bearings. Which indicators are right for a process in the specific context needs to be decided at the start, ideally together with the representatives of the authority, the various common-interest groups and the outside experts brought in.

³ See the Annex for the various sustainability checklists.

Bring outside experts in

Along with their local knowledge, those involved in a participation process bring in a wide range of ideas about and perspectives on the topic in question. Quite apart from the aspect of deepening democracy, this is a further advantage of participation. Going a step further, it may well be necessary or sensible to bring in outside experts to cover issues arising in a project that are relevant to sustainability, but would otherwise be neglected in the participation process. Their task is to ensure that the specialized knowledge on hand is taken into account and professional standards are complied with. Bringing experts in can help with covering the first two points mentioned (experts can put things into context, draw attention to relevant statutory and other provisions, and also assist with carrying out sustainability checks).

2. Make sure that the participants reflect the range of interests actually on hand

Selecting the participants

For ecological, social and economic aspects to be represented fairly, it is essential to take the greatest care in selecting the common-interest groups and their representatives – who must be involved if a high-quality, lasting result is to be achieved – at the planning stage.

When participation processes are being planned, care should be taken not to put low-income common-interest groups at a disadvantage, e.g. by requiring participants to invest a lot of time/work, or by necessitating substantial expenses for travel or accommodation.

The interests of future generations and the global perspective can be brought into the process by specially selected proxies, who act as advocates of these special interests.

Ensure fairness by means of the process design and the way it is chaired

Apart from selecting the right participants, it is important to ensure during the process that all the various common-interest groups can express their points of view and make their presence felt. Existing discrepancies in power and influence, say between individuals or the representatives of powerless and powerful common-interest groups, can be evened out, e.g.

- by means of the process design: for instance, when the participants are being selected the ability of the various organizations to get their way can be taken into account, or the amount of work required can be matched to the resources of the groups taking part,

- by means of specially selected methods of work: for instance, alongside a stakeholder study group in which NGO's, professional associations and other semi-official organizations are represented, a jury of ordinary citizens selected at random also sits,
- by means of chairing procedure: for instance, speaking time is assigned fairly and everything said is minuted uniformly and counts the same.⁴

Involving the general public is one of the preconditions for establishing the target of sustainable development in society, politics and business life. But this will succeed only if, when participation processes are planned and carried out, full attention is given to the various different dimensions of sustainable development. The discussion in this paper may help those in charge and all participants to align participation processes toward sustainability.

⁴ For more information about process design and methods see <http://www.partizipation.at/methods.html> and <http://www.partizipation.at/worksheets.html>

Annex

A selection of sustainability checks for various fields of application:

Southeast Sustainability Checklist, UK

The Southeast Sustainability Checklist is intended for use at the design and planning application stages of a new development. It focuses on the sustainability issues pertinent to spatial planning, although it does address those construction and “in-use” issues that can be anticipated or influenced at the design phase. The Checklist assumes that the sustainability of sites being brought forward for development in Local Plans has been subject to Sustainability Appraisal / Strategic Environmental Assessment and has been tested at Examination in Public. As a result there is less focus on the location of the site.

The Checklist is a tool for decision makers. Flexibility is built into the tool to allow for variations in sites and locations as issues pertinent in one area may be less significant in another. The Checklist is an online tool and covers regionally specific sustainability and planning issues, emphasising those of higher priority. It can also be adapted to reflect locally significant concerns

The tool identifies a range of sustainability issues covered in the Regional Spatial Strategy for the South East, enabling users to assess to what extent a design proposal will deliver on each issue.

<http://southeast.sustainabilitychecklist.co.uk/>

Tourism Sustainability Checklist, Baltic Region

This Sustainability Checklist has been developed as part of the INTERREG III B agora project which aimed to promote sustainable tourism development in the Baltic Sea Region (see: www.agora-tourism.net). The Sustainability Check defines a tourism project as a plan to achieve a defined goal within a defined time span. Typically, this plan is a one-off undertaking. The Sustainability Check should be used for projects that require the support or implementation of sustainable tourism.

The checklist contains 27 questions which need to be answered.

http://www.yepat.uni-greifswald.de/agora/fileadmin/agoradaten/WP22/Agora_Sustainability_Check_-_Checklist-1.doc

Sustainability Checklist for rezoning & development permit applications, Port Coquitlam, Canada

This Sustainability Checklist has been developed for the City of Port Coquitlam to integrate economy, environment and society and to ensure that the planning activities do not compromise the ability of any of the systems to function currently and in the future. The location, composition, density, and design of new development projects can have an immense, cumulative impact on the community's ability to sustain a healthy economy and reasonable cost of living, to provide effective and accessible public services, and to protect the environment. By providing sustainability criteria, the City enables developers to create the most sustainable project possible.

http://www.portcoquitlam.ca/__shared/assets/Sustainability_Checklist2040.pdf

Local Agenda 21: Self-assess your local process for sustainable development

Local Evaluation 21 is the Local Authorities online self-assessment tool, which can be used free of charge to evaluate processes and progress towards sustainable development from a local authority perspective. The check is based on two questionnaires: a self-assessment for the local authority representative, as well as an assessment carried out by any stakeholder organization invited. A feedback report will be emailed back, providing a standardised external assessment. This can be used to identify areas of success in local sustainable development, and areas of further work.

<http://www.localevaluation21.org>

STRATEGIC GROUP ON PARTICIPATION

In 2002, on the initiative of the Ministry of the Environment, ÖGUT set up the Strategic Group on Participation, which is intended to

- > give the notion of „Participation“ clearer contours, develop it further and make it more widely known,
- > promote awareness of participation in the public eye and among decision-makers in politics, the administration and business,
- > work out participation strategies for policies relevant to the environment and sustainability,
- > contribute to sustainable development by promoting participation,
- > promote participation at communal, regional and national level,
- > make concrete “how to” guides available to people with practical interests.

The members of the Strategic Group on Participation are qualified experts on the subject with backgrounds in many different fields. The following experts were members of the group when this worksheet was drafted. For the status quo of membership please visit <http://www.partizipation.at/members.html>:

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THE WORKSHEETS AS PRODUCTS OF THE STRATEGIC GROUP

The results of debate within the Strategic Group are summarized and published as “Worksheets on Participation” and aim at facilitating practitioners’ work.

- > The Worksheet No. 1 on Participation drawn up in the Strategic Group contains a checklist on preconditions for participation processes in the public sphere and a checklist on quality criteria for participation processes in the public sphere.
- > The Worksheet No. 2 on Participation presents an array of arguments in connexion with the question of what benefits participation provides for which groups of agents.
- > The Worksheet No. 3 on Participation deals with the limits of and possible obstacles to participation processes, and with the risk of such processes being misused.
- > No. 4 of the Worksheets on participation contains recommendations for dealing with statements in formal and informal participation processes.
- > Worksheet No. 5 is concerned with ways of reaching decisions in participation processes, and is meant to simplify the task of identifying the most suitable way in a particular case.
- > Worksheet No. 6 discusses possible expectations in participation processes.

All products from the Strategic Group are available on the website www.partizipation.at.

Utilizing the worksheets is permitted and encouraged, provided that reference is made to the “authorship of the ÖGUT Strategic Group on Participation”. Responses and comments are welcome, and will be taken into account as revised versions are generated.

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