

In brief... Who's framing who?

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Some experimental evaluation criteria for DIPs

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At the workshop that led to this edition of PLA Notes, several contributors noted how few independent evaluations there had been of past attempts at DIPs. To an even greater extent there have been few attempts to critically compare different DIPs. To attempt this at all with incomplete information is perhaps foolhardy, especially since I bring my own biases towards the DIPs of which I have most knowledge. But as editors we believed it too important a task to be shrunk from. We hope readers, especially those who have been part of the DIPs analysed here, will take the following analysis in the spirit of heuristic debate.

The table below summarises the analysis, and is followed by a short section dealing with each criterion.

Table 1 Comparative evaluation of DIPs

Evaluation Criterion	Best practice	Weaker performance
Diverse Control	IPPR Citizens' Juries	Welsh Gene Testing Jury
Framing and Scope	Danish Scenarios	India Farmer Foresight
Interactivity and Interrogation	Citizen Foresight	UK Gov. Biosciences
Reference Timeframe	Swiss PubliForum	UK Dept of Health
Transparency	None	UK Consensus Conference on Radioactive Waste
Empowerment and/or Advocacy	UK Dept. of Health	Edinburgh Focus Groups

Diverse control

All the areas of science and technology chosen for the use of the DIPs described above have been fairly or extremely controversial. It is therefore critical that the process is under the control of representatives of organisations with different vested interests on the topic concerned. This avoids the need to defend the assertion, which was a hallmark of the UK Public Consultation on the Biosciences, that the Government was providing unbiased information about biotechnology to those involved in their deliberative focus groups. Irwin (this issue) touches on these and other issues relating to control.

High: IPPR Citizens Juries

Delap's article shows how, when carried out according to their guidelines, the IPPR citizens' jury methodology ensured that all parts of the process were agreed by a diverse array of stakeholders. Where possible, it is also desirable to have a funding source with vested interests in favour of conflicting trajectories for the technology.

Low: Welsh Gene Testing Jury

Although ostensibly overseen by a mixture of academics and commercial representatives, the citizens' jury conducted on genetic

testing and discussed by Glasner (this issue) was essentially under the control of one funding source (a major pharmaceutical company) and was not overseen by a single opponent of genetic testing.

Cunningham-Burley and colleagues (this issue) highlight the importance of looking beyond participation techniques that are explicitly 'organised' by analysts. They suggest a move towards a model where citizens instigate and design the process without it needing to be done 'from above'.

Framing and scope

The way in which a participatory process is allowed to extend its scope beyond a particular technology to examine broader issues, whether they be alternative options or social justice perspectives, is critical to the extent to which it empowers people is merely used to legitimise established power structures and their chosen technological trajectories. Even the way discussions are framed by information, witnesses or questions provided can have an important influence on the extent to which citizens have the opportunity to develop their own visions for the future. The paper by Wallace on the nuclear waste consensus conference highlights the way in which inadequate framing may have brought about a result diametrically opposed to that which might have occurred had the participants been allowed to begin from different framing assumptions and hear a broader range of evidence.

High: Danish Scenarios

The discussions described by Andersen & Jæger (this issue) involved a series of pre-formulated yet contrasting scenarios for the future of a particular area of technology. Participants could discuss their visions and attitudes to the presented scenarios and suggest preconditions to their adoption. By providing options, rather than a blank slate, their method provides an easily applicable approach that avoids the complete pre-framing of the subject by the organisers.

Low: India Farmer Foresight

In India, two scenarios comprised of two starkly different technological trajectories for agriculture, one based on GM seed and continued chemical use, the other on saved indigenous seeds, traditional technologies and organic methods. Satya Murty and Wakeford (this issue) describe how the scenario aspect of the jury, the juror's framing of key questions for witnesses and evaluation of different possible future scenarios, did not work as well as planned. Partly due to a misunderstanding in the facilitation of the opening session, and partly because of over-ambitious timetabling, there was little opportunity to ensure the witnesses focused on the jurors' highest priorities. In retrospect it would have taken at least a full day with a specially trained facilitator to carry out a proper scenario building process of this sort.

Interactivity and interrogation

Closely related to the framing of an issue is the extent to which citizens are allowed to interrogate the sources of information they receive, or are merely the passive recipients of written briefings and expert testimonies.

High: Citizen Foresight

The Citizen Foresight process (see Box 1 in Satya Murty and Wakeford, this issue) began with a brainstorm about the possible future options for agriculture that allowed citizens to also determine the criteria by which these options would be assessed. They then interacted with witnesses from academia, government and the food industry. Less than a fifth of the time they had with each witness was spent listening to a presentation, the vast majority of the period being spent on discussing among themselves and interrogating the witness. Citizens were also given the opportunity to request further witnesses on subjects that they did not feel had been covered in sufficient detail.

Low: UK Government Biosciences

Irwin (this issue) describes how the twenty participants in each of six workshops around the UK were briefed using prompt cards by executives from the market research company MORI. Apart from feedback at the end of the process, citizens had no opportunity to question the information with which they had been briefed, or to steer the course of the discussion in a direction other than that determined by MORI. Nor could they ask for additional information as the MORI executives had no facility for calling for witnesses or further briefings.

Reference timeframe

The ability of citizens to reach conclusions that look beyond immediate needs, working within political or economic constraints, to examine long-term risks and opportunities is an important consideration in DIPs processes, especially those that deal with a range of scientific and technological issues.

High: Swiss PubliForum

Mirenowicz (this issue) describes how the citizens in the Swiss PubliForum remarkably introduce their report with the clearly defined goal 'to satisfy the long term demand in energy in a sustainable way'; a goal which gives its coherence to the entire report.

Low: UK Department of Health

Two public one-day fora were set up by the Department of Health: one in London, one in Leeds, in which a hundred people were brought together for one day to discuss their priorities for the National Health Service. As Lenaghan (this issue) describes, the timeframe was implicitly restricted to immediate priorities rather than an examination of long-term issues, such as investment in preventative medicine versus research into hi-tech treatments such as gene-therapy.

Transparency

If stakeholder groups, especially those whose vested interests incline them to oppose citizens' conclusions, do not have a clear unambiguous record of what went on in DIP events, they will inevitably be tempted to undermine the credibility of the exercise, however professionally it has been carried out. There are various ways of documenting DIPs, including audio-visual recordings and interviews with various actors within them.

Medium: Citizen Foresight

The whole deliberation process was video-recorded with a single camera left unattended on a tripod at the side of the room. One stakeholder who was suspicious about a possible bias in the hearings watched all 30 hours of tape and pronounced themselves satisfied that the citizens had not been unfairly influenced. A weakness

however, was that the project failed to raise enough funds to have an evaluator sitting in on the process watching interactions that might have been too subtle to be caught on video.

Low: UK Consensus Conference on Radioactive Waste

Whatever the intentions of the funders (a UK government research council and radioactive waste disposal authority), this consensus conference, described by Wallace (this issue), was not initially presented in way that was transparent or accessible. The briefing weekends were not open to scrutiny by those opposing nuclear waste disposal, and the close affiliation to the nuclear industry of various supposedly 'independent' experts were not made clear to the participants when they were choosing from whom they wanted to hear evidence.

Empowerment and/or advocacy

Just as important as holding a participation process, is the use of the results to influence change, either by the participants themselves (empowerment) or on their behalf (advocacy). This is perhaps the most frequently neglected element of participatory methods, yet without it, the exercise does little more than gather information, while raising expectations of participants that some change might occur.

High: UK Department of Health (National Health Service)

The Department of Health's use of a nation-wide questionnaire, a MORI survey and two public fora may have been flawed in terms of many of the above evaluation criteria, but it succeeded in providing an input for some viewpoints from citizens that had not been taken note of until then. As outlined in Lenaghan's (this issue) contribution to this volume, it enabled civil servants sympathetic to participatory methods to use their results to successfully lobby for policy changes.

Low: Edinburgh Genetics

Despite the richness of its insights, the Edinburgh study described by Cunningham-Burley and colleagues (this issue) was not used either for the direct empowerment of the citizens to bring their conclusions to policy-makers, nor were the results taken up on behalf of the citizens by campaigning organisations. Focus groups are particularly difficult for direct empowerment of the citizens involved as they are usually not themselves even aware of the conclusions that have been reached.

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