

Twenty years of citizen conferences in France.

What assessment can be made ?

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Since 1998 – when the first citizens' conference was organized in France, on the use of GMOs in agriculture (Boy, Donnet-Kamel, Roqueplo, 2000; Marris, Joly: 2000), we have observed the development of such experiments initiated not only by public authorities, but by private firms, local authorities and NGOs.

After a brief overview of the French context regarding public participation, we will discuss the various assumptions on which the success of citizen conferences relies, as they are promoted as a way to democratize both decision-making processes and scientific issues.

Then we will try to give an assessment of the use of citizen conferences from 1998 to present. To what extent did citizen conferences lead to changes in science and technology issues ? Public participation tools in general remain barely evaluated, even if recently a cluster of studies has focused on this question, and various evaluation frameworks have been proposed. When assessments are available, however, procedural dimensions remain their main focus while the more substantive outcomes are often simply ignored. Among the numerous evaluation frameworks suggested, David Guston (1999) is one of the very few authors who focuses on the issue of the assessment not only of the procedural quality of the process, but on the different kinds of impacts it can have. He stresses that apart from the actual impact on policies or decisions (budget, regulations, etc), there can be impacts on general thinking, framing of the issue, public knowledge and political agendas in general. This is the framework we will use for our assessment, based on which we shall discuss the reasons why this device is actually promoted by various kind of public and private actors.

Participatory mechanisms can be ordered according to three main models: the corporatist model (stakeholders dealing in consultative bodies) ; large public debate model (i.e., consultation about major infrastructure plans); Mini-publics model (deliberative poll; consensus conference, etc.). For different reasons, this last model is often presented as the best institutional design as long as science, technologies and innovations are at stake.

Bibliography

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