

## Mediation through Visual Problem Appraisal

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### Abstract

Visual Problem Appraisal offers an alternative to learning through face-to-face interactions. The filmed narratives of distanced or overlooked stakeholders are brought to policy makers in a mediated way through film.

Visual Problem Appraisal (VPA) is a film based learning system that was designed to train young professionals in problem and policy analysis competencies. The VPA-methodology offers an alternative to learning through face-to-face interactions. As a training tool for impact assessment professionals it increases their competencies for problem analysis, reduces self referentiality, and increases commitment for concerned stakeholders and when used in interactive settings enhances intersubjective consensus.

In practice the stakeholder narratives in the filmed interviews proved to have the potential to act as a means for mediated participation of underrepresented or otherwise overlooked stakeholders. VPA proved to be a means for mediated participation through which one aims to bring 'distanced' or 'overlooked' stakeholders in a mediated way to the doorstep of decision makers. It promotes inclusion of their stories, concerns and proposals in decision-making processes because it allows policy and decision makers to 'learn' in mediated interaction with distant stakeholders.

In situations where live encounters between decision makers and overlooked primary stakeholders are not feasible or realistic, mediated participation seems to enhance quality and legitimacy of policymaking and decision-making. VPA therefore has the potential to support sustainable transitions as it promotes equity and access to the policy arena.

**Key words:** Mediation, Mediated Participation, Public Participation, Stakeholder Analysis, Visual Problem Appraisal (VPA)

### Introduction

Participation is a basic governance requirement for successful transitions. Modern ICT tools have radically changed the possibilities for information sharing and public involvement in impact assessment. Interactive tools allow for new forms of participation. ICT tools like computer based interactive models, the internet and mobile phones have radically changed the possibilities for information sharing and public involvement in impact assessment. Interactive applications, like on-line games, simulations and interactive 3D EIA models allow for project

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proponents and opponents to assess and appreciate the impacts of various interventions. The use of ICT need not be restricted to extension kind of activities; interactive map tables, participatory GIS and likewise techniques are used for involving the public in information gathering and designing alternatives too. Nonetheless there is a big group of stakeholders that cannot or do not participate in impact assessment processes, either because they are hard to be reached or choose not to be reached.

Mediated participation is about using media to facilitate stakeholder participation in policy processes especially focusing on those stakeholders that are hard to be reached or choose not to be reached.

In this paper public participation in impact assessment and stakeholder consultation is the point of departure. We will briefly describe the Visual Problem Appraisal methodology and report on our study of how mediated participation is manifest while using VPA in the public domain. We will assess to what extent this methodology replaces or complements to live participation and indicate the potential contribution of mediated participation to public participation in impact assessment and policy processes.

Our analysis and assessments are empirically based and largely rest on the PhD research executed by Witteveen (2009a) while the concept of mediated participation has been described in the Summer 2009 Issue of IJP2 (Witteveen 2009b). Intermediate research findings were reported at subsequent IAIA Conferences and published in journal articles.

### **Public participation in impact assessment and stakeholder consultation**

Public participation in impact assessment is conceptualized by Andre et al. (2006) as involving individuals and groups that are positively or negatively affected by a proposed intervention (e.g., a project, a program, a plan, a policy), are subject to a decision-making process or are interested in it. This definition is elaborated in the context of technological and infrastructural interventions that in most countries are subject to legal Environmental and Strategic Impact Assessment (EIA, SIA) procedures, including a regulatory framework for processes of public participation. Legally required or not, it is widely accepted that sustainable change cannot be accomplished without social engagement. All concerned stakeholders should participate in policy and decision making processes.

To act on the often neglected issue of access to participation and to enhance accountability for the quality of the public participation process, professional organizations like the International Association for Public Participation (IAP2) ([www1](http://www1)) and the International Association for Impact Assessment (IAIA) ([www2](http://www2)) developed Best Practice Principles or guidelines. These Best Practice Principles represent the core values of these organizations and therewith aim to promote a meaningful practice of public participation (Andre et al., 2006). Consequently, they might provide inspiration and criteria for assessing the potential contribution of mediated participation to public participation processes. (See also: Enserink et al 2008)

Decision makers, policy designers and developers, whether bound by legal requirements for public participation or not, may be reluctant to organize demanding processes of public participation. As we describe in Witteveen et al (2009b) this reluctance does not imply that they are unwilling to consider stakeholder views in framing the problem and alternatives. The reluctance may be grounded in apparently sound reasons and tangible constraints such as low accessibility to rural communities, long travel distances between central and peripheral

locations, and a top-down political culture. It either means that these stakeholders are stigmatized, excluded or ignored by definition. Other reasons include low expected rewards in terms of electoral votes, low status-related benefits of particular working settings and low access of remote stakeholder groups to exacerbating public pressure through the media. On the other hand, some stakeholders might find it difficult to openly express their opinions in front of decision makers. Minority groups, realizing that they are absent on the public agenda, sometimes do establish their own forms of organization and communication. They may withdraw deliberately from public debates and even develop their own discourse. In this context, Molina y Vedia (2008) focused on the concept of silence or silencing. She explained this ‘silenciamiento’ as a reaction of a minority group to social exclusion. For the minority groups concerned, this creates a further widening of the gap between the majority and the minority groups as their communication systems and languages diverge over time. Sunstein (2003:29), analyzing conformity studies in organizations and societies, suggest that silencing also results from peer pressure where people “sometimes fear that they will, through their dissent, weaken the effectiveness and reputation of the group to which they belong.” Another issue that may constitute an argument for using mediated participation is a constrained ability to communicate (Leeuwis, 2004) as a result of issues of languages (tongue and discourse), cultures and other barriers in direct communication (Witteveen and Enserink, 2007a). The provision of stakeholder views in a mediated way on to the doorsteps of decision makers and policy designers may therefore facilitate the consideration of the otherwise absent interested and affected parties.

### **Visual Problem Appraisal**

Visual Problem Appraisal (VPA) is a film-based learning strategy that aims to enhance the analysis of a complex problem. The VPA methodology was first developed for the international classroom, where it has proved to be a strong and motivating learning environment that enhances students’ personal learning orientation and generates enthusiasm. But VPA also proved to be a valuable tool for learning in the social sphere (Witteveen and Enserink, 2007b). The core of the VPA with respect to communicating ideas and stakeholder perceptions is the active observation of the articulation of the diverse problem perceptions encapsulated in the filmed narratives of the various stakeholders.

Confronting practitioners, local communities, civil society, developers, decision makers and technical specialists with the uncertainties, the diverse perspectives and problem perceptions of concerned stakeholders is conceived as a first step in coping with complexity. Consequently, VPA guides the users through a program – from problem exploration and stakeholder consultation, to proposed action.

A VPA package normally consists of two documentaries (framing reality from different perspectives), a fair amount of filmed stakeholder narratives, a printed facilitators’ guide and a workbook for workshop participants. The package provides the materials necessary for the VPA methodology to be implemented. Several VPA sets were produced; the most important ones VPA Kerala’s Coast on coastal zone management issues in South-west India and the VPA HIV/AIDS and Rural Development in Sub-Saharan Africa (VPA A&RD) on the social and economical impacts of HIV/AIDS on rural communities.

## **Mediated Participation**

We define mediated participation as the participation of primary stakeholders through filmed narratives in public policy and decision making. These filmed narratives are used to create a social dialogue between secondary stakeholders (live presence) and primary stakeholders (mediated presence) focusing on a public issue. (Witteveen et al 2009b). VPA aims to create a space where the interviewees share their stories on film while the audience feels the 'live' presence of their selected informant. To achieve mediated participation of filmed stakeholders through VPA, the film style or narrative should contribute to creating a mediated dialogue between the interviewee and the audience.

The contribution of mediated participation to impact assessment in the Scoping and Stakeholder Consultation Stage lead to (Witteveen et al 2009b): enhanced problem and policy analysis capacity; intersubjective consensus and social learning; reduced self-referentiality and increased commitment for concerned primary stakeholders reflected in the policy design and implementation, and resulting transformation strategies.

Mediated participation has been framed as creating spaces for stakeholder dialogue and social learning by removing social, cultural, psychological and/or physical barriers between authorities, policy makers and primary stakeholders. In this section we analyze whether mediated participation works in practice and is translated into policies. In Witteveen et al (2009b) criteria for successful mediation were elaborated, which included: (a) the mandate of the users, (b) whether the concerns expressed by the primary stakeholders are taken into account, and (c) whether the mediated participation process leads to action, e.g. agenda setting, to new policies or the reformulation of existing ones.

The use of the VPA A&RD provides concrete indications that VPA has the potential to promote discussion and, put new issues on the policy agenda, and that it leads to concrete action. The flow of events in the VPA A&RD, its dynamic character, and the way the information of the VPA interviewees is framed, is very similar to workshops conducted in the context of other VPA packages. The latter were reported on in Witteveen and Enserink (2007a, b), but they mainly focused on VPA in educational settings.

VPA is hypothesized to be a strategy enabling primary stakeholders to express themselves to a wider audience of policy and decision makers. The empirical evidence presented in Witteveen et al (2009) suggests that the VPA A&RD fulfills these expectations to a great extent. The rural people infected and/or affected by the HIV/AIDS epidemic who joined the production process indicated that issues hindering 'live' participation included the cost of traveling, physical impairments and (self) stigmatization. Consequently normally unheard stories were told, and participants and policy makers recognized the realism of the encounter, gained new insights and learned about the complexity of the issue. Most importantly, they responded to the need for action. The latter proves the potential power of media use for representing the underrepresented and the impact of their stories once they are listened to.

## **Conclusion**

Mediated participation brings 'distanced' or 'overlooked' stakeholders in a mediated way to the doorstep of decision makers. It promotes inclusion of their stories, concerns and proposals in decision making processes because it allows policy and decision makers to 'learn' in mediated interaction with distant stakeholders. The other way around it was observed that stakeholder contributing a filmed narrative appreciated that they were consulted and listened to in a way that was safe and accessible.

We can therefore assert that mediated participation indeed contributes to the quality of public participation processes, especially for underrepresented or overlooked stakeholders.

## Literature

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