

Assessing the Public Participation Best Practice Principles as criteria for evaluation: the case of mediated representation in visual problem appraisal.

IAIA'08 Perth Australia

Session: The Art and Science of Public Participation in Impact Assessment, Chairs: Bert Enserink, Dusica Radojcic, John Devlin, Concurrent Session

Authors: Bert Enserink, Loes Witteveen and Rico Lie¹

Abstract

IAIA's Best Practice Principles should spur correct and ethically justifiable impact assessment practices. This implies that the principles published should be used as a touchstone and eventually as an evaluation framework for its member's practices. After two years of discussion amongst IA practitioners the Public Participation Best Practices Principles (PPBPP) were published in 2006. In this paper we present and evaluate our practice of mediated representation as applied in the 'Visual Problem Appraisal AIDS and rural development' and use the principles to evaluate the promises and limitations of this particular participation practice.

While applying the PPBPP as evaluation framework to evaluate our practice, we put to the test these principles themselves too: are they suitable for evaluating practice? Our research showed that assessment turned out to be hard as operationalizing the principles unambiguously was impossible. We conclude that the intentional ambiguity of the guidelines has both positive and negative consequences for using them as a framework for evaluation; if you want guidelines only and a framework for reference; they give sufficient direction.

¹ B. Enserink, Delft University of Technology, Faculty of Technology, Policy and Management, P.O. Box 5015, 2600 GA Delft, The Netherlands, Phone: +31.15.2788071, E-mail: b.enserink@tudelft.nl

L.M. Witteveen, Larenstein University of Professional Education, Department of Rural Development and Innovation, P.O. Box 411 6700 AK Wageningen, The Netherlands, Phone: +31.570.684643, E-mail: L.M.Witteveen@larenstein.nl

R.Lie, Wageningen University and research Center [Communication Strategies Group](#) P.O.Box 9101, 6700HB Wageningen, The Netherlands, Phone: +31-317-482599, E-mail: rico.lie@wur.nl

Introduction

Societal change towards sustainability – the conference theme - cannot be accomplished without social engagement and participation. Public participation may be defined as the involvement of individuals and groups that are positively or negatively affected by a proposed intervention (e.g., a project, a program, a plan, a policy) subject to a decision-making process or are interested in it. (Andre et al, 2006; further referred to as the Public Participation Best Practices Principles or PPBPP) In practice the level of participation in IA can vary according to social, political and cultural determinants (Enserink et al, 2007).

Our research interest is on facilitating those groups of weak stakeholders who are most affected by accessibility constraints such as long distances, lack of resources, physical impediments and reasons of social exclusions and therefore do not participate. One of the ways these stakeholders might present their stakes is by using media for transferring their views and opinions to the policy makers and the other way around. Departing from rapid appraisal techniques we developed the film-based Visual Problem Appraisal (VPA) as a method for analysis and social learning (Witteveen 2007a,b) VPA presupposes that stakeholders can be filmed in their own locality and on their own conditions, respecting their languages, rhythms and routines. Previous research papers presented at this series of annual conferences show the sequence of our efforts to design a simulation for formal education towards a tool to engage people in social learning processes, towards a means of visual representation. (Witteveen et al, 2006, 2007b,c)

We take IAIA's Best Practice Principles to evaluate our film practice as a means of stakeholder representation, does VPA stand up against criticism? Is it a good practice and does it lead to better policies? By doing so a new issue arises: are the PPBPP fit as criteria for evaluation?

Visual Problem Appraisal and mediated representation

Visual Problem Appraisal (VPA) is a film based methodology that typically aims to enhance the analysis of 'wicked problems' (Mason & Mitroff, 1981). The core activity in the application of the VPA is the active observation of filmed interviews with the various stakeholders in a policy area. It is a powerful instrument for social learning and action, allowing social groups who normally do not meet to exchange ideas and information. (Witteveen and Enserink, 2007b) The VPA AIDS & Rural Development was produced in the context of international project activities of the LAPNARD network (<http://www.lapnard.com/>) in East and West Africa and Asia. It provides an opportunity to explore the issue of AIDS & Rural Development in areas with low and high prevalence rates. In the context of the 'VPA AIDS & Rural Development' we experienced that specific issues of accessibility for rural people infected and/or affected by the HIV/AIDS epidemic related to cost of traveling, physical impairments, and stigmatization, which inhibited participation. 'Meeting' a number of stakeholders in the filmed interviews allows decision makers and developers to learn about the different perspectives of the rural people infected and affected by the epidemic and about the way they frame their problems. (Witteveen et al, 2007c)

Criteria for assessing ethics and impacts

The PPBPP document (Andre et al, 2006) states a number of basic principles, which can be interpreted as a rudimentary objectives hierarchy (Keeney 1992). As VPA is an analytical instrument and conceptualized as a social learning activity these basic principles seem fit as criteria for evaluation²:

² For full text see: <http://www.iaia.org/modx/assets/files/SP4%20web.pdf>

- **Adapted to the context** – Understanding, appreciating and respecting the social institutions, values, and culture of the communities.
- **Informative and proactive** – Recognizing that the public has a right to be informed early and in a meaningful way.
- **Adaptive and communicative** – Recognizing that the public is heterogeneous according to their demographics, knowledge, power, values and interests.
- **Inclusive and equitable** – Ensuring that all interests are respected regarding the distribution of impacts, compensation and benefits. Equity between present and future generations in a perspective of sustainability should be promoted.
- **Educative** – Contributing to a mutual respect and understanding.
- **Cooperative** – Promoting cooperation, convergence and consensus-building rather than confrontation.
- **Imputable** – Improving the proposal and taking into account the results of the PP process.

Assessment

Assessing a method as to its impacts is a complicated task. We distinguish four perspectives that should be taken into account: producer, contributor, user and facilitator, as we expect different evaluations depending on their different positions, role and use of VPA. Point of departure of our evaluation is the assessment of the events and outcomes of four typical VPA workshops. The workshops lasted two full days and were held with different groups of (young) professionals at different locations. The first workshop was held in the Netherlands in a formal education setting; the workshops in Zambia and Tanzania were activities fitting in the LAPNARD scheme with professional field workers, agricultural extensionists from Africa and Asia who in their daily practice are confronted with the effects of AIDS in rural settings and were followed by field work. The fourth and final workshop was held in Congo in January 2008 in preparation of a new visual problem appraisal project ‘Kadogo’ on the issue of reconciliation in war ridden areas with a focus on the issue of child soldiers. The scores on the criteria in the matrices presented here are based on the evaluation reports and written statements of the workshop participants, in special the scores in Table 1. and the ‘users’ scores in Table 2. The other scores are based on our own observations, footage, field notes, project reports and expert judgment.

Four workshops

From Table 1 we read that the VPA A&RD scored relatively well on almost all principles. The highest scores are on ‘Inclusive and equitable’ and ‘Educative’. This comes as no surprise as the design of the method takes these principles as a basic design requirement; stakeholder selection and making explicit biases to prevent overlooking relevant underrepresented groups are inherent to any PRA-based method.

The Congo workshop stands out against the others with respect to adaptation to context. This was expressed by the participants when making explicit that it did not matter that the interviews were from other countries than Congo (in special Zambia) as the circumstances showed and stories told could have been taken from any remote area in Central Africa. The same workshop scores highest at cooperativeness too as the strategies produced led to immediate action and activities and could be translated into requirements for the VPA Kadogo, whereas in formal education the possibilities for immediate action are very limited. Informative and proactive scores positive too as VPA informs in a meaningful way; it shows how AIDS effects the daily life of people living with HIV and AIDS (further: PLWHA) and how it impacts their social and economical livelihoods. The personalized information and destigmatization motivated participants to engage with the problem.

Table 1. Evaluation of four VPA workshops ‘AIDS and Rural Development’ (User perspective)

| Pre condition | NL | ZA | TZ | Congo DR | outcome |
|----------------------------|-----|-----|-----|----------|---------|
| Adapted to context | n/a | ++ | + | +++ | ++ |
| Informative and pro active | + | ++ | ++ | ++ | ++ |
| Adaptive and communicative | + | + | + | + | + |
| Inclusive and equitable | +++ | +++ | +++ | +++ | +++ |
| Educative | ++ | +++ | +++ | +++ | +++ |
| Cooperative | n/a | + | + | ++ | + |
| Imputable | n/a | n/a | n/a | n/a | n/a |

n/a = not applicable; -- = bad; - = insufficient; + = sufficient; ++ = good; +++ = very good

NL: Workshops with 14 international MSc students: ZA workshop with 14 Zambian professionals and policymakers; TZ: refresher course with 24 African and Asian professionals and policymakers; Congo: Workshop in the context of preparing the RAV Kadogo with 32 professionals (Mainly NGO staff)

In practice working with VPA led to several concrete initiatives and follow-up activities (Witeveen et al, 2007c). The principle ‘Imputable’ does not apply as VPA is not aimed at improving a proposal under study, rather VPA precedes the project stage and is about problem analysis and stock taking. Another consideration comes to mind where VPA deviates from good practices principles: in VPA in general there is no such activity as reporting and feedback to the stakeholders about results?³ Clearly this ‘imputable’ principle does not apply to the VPA method or the concept of mediated representation.

Four Perspectives

A first glance at the evaluation matrix (See Table 2) shows that not all criteria or principles apply to our mediated representation practice. Especially from the contributor perspective there are many blanks. The method is based on representation of their ideas and issues and therefore is not intended to inform them about our policies but to inform the users and policy makers! Moreover assessing the adaptation to the context by the contributors and whether it is educative is hard to assess. In the case of VPA Aids and rural development, in contrast to VPA Kerala’s Coast, the contributors did not see the material themselves; consequently there was not a learning activity or environment to adapt to, nor did they learn in a direct way from other contributions. The scores for the producers and facilitators are largely the same as both intentionally work with the VPA with the objective to initiate and support learning processes. The scores of the users are even more interesting; they coincide with the evaluation scores in Table 1 and show an intermediate score on adaptation to context, adaptive and communicative and cooperative as they ‘connect’ to the contributors in an indirect way: through media. At the same time the use of film allows the users to watch, listen, digest, interpret, discuss and eventually watch again and reinterpret and re-discuss the message of the contributors without disturbing or interfering with the contributors daily life. Especially with respect to PLWHA this is a big advantage as it allows users to reflect, express, discuss and re-evaluate their own ideas and biases. In other words: there is a safe distance.

³ In some instances we were able to show interviewees their own films but we made the explicit promise that we would *not* be back and would not show them their films. If we did, these instances were exceptions to the rule.

Table 2. Evaluation of VPA AIDS and Rural Development

| Pre condition | Producers | Contributors | Users | Facilitators |
|----------------------------|---|---|--|---|
| Adapted to context | Filming on location Local language | n/a | Inevitable yet bound by available films | Guard the reframing mechanisms |
| Informative and pro active | n/a | n/a | When using the VPA for policy design (exercise 1) | n/a |
| Adaptive and communicative | Representative selection of stakeholders On location | Adapted to local circumstances, filmed at home or working place | Safe distance | Adapted to users |
| Inclusive and equitable | Inclusiveness and equity are basic principles | Consented participation is basic requirement | n/a | Guard for exclusion and biases in selection; stimulate frame reflection |
| Educative | Basic principle | n/a | Meeting people you never met before | Generating respect and understanding |
| Cooperative | n/a | n/a | Inevitable yet bound by use methodology | n/a |
| Imputable | n/a | n/a | n/a | n/a |

When considering the above scores to be a reasonable representation of the actual performance of mediated representation as implied in the VPA methodology, we can conclude that VPA scores well on several criteria/principles. Mediated representation therefore can be considered a form of (public) participation. At the same time we were not able to assess the scores on five out of the seven main principles for the contributors; in this case the group of neglected/ underrepresented stakeholders. Taking into account the objective that the latter group should be represented and their message spread, one can argue that the scores in the category users are more important for deciding whether VPA fulfills the requirements of a good practice. But the argument that mediated representation thus is not a (very) good practice also holds. One can wonder whether this unclear outcome should be attributed to the quality of the practice; to the quality of the assessment or to the quality of the criteria? The latter leads us back to our starting point: are the PPBPP suited for evaluation?

Discussion and Conclusion

The fact that it proved hard to apply the PPBPP as evaluation criteria for our practice of mediated representation generates a number of questions:

- If we do consider mediated representation a (public) participation practice, why was it so hard to assess the performance on the criteria? In other words did we apply the criteria correctly?
- If we applied the criteria correctly and do consider mediated representation a public participation practice are then the criteria the right criteria for assessing the performance of participation practices, or
- Do we need other/better criteria for assessing the quality of our participatory practices?

Assessing the scores on the various criteria turned out to be hard as operationalizing them or exact measurement of performance was impossible. We encountered composed criteria as some of our PPBPPs have a double objective like 'inclusive and equitable' and at times these two elements can clash. Moreover, some of the criteria, especially "imputable" did not apply to our method. Scoring badly or not at all on some criteria did not refute our method though. Maybe a good practice does not necessarily live up to all good practice rules?

The PPBPP's intentional ambiguity has both positive and negative consequences for using them as a framework for evaluation. They are the outcome of a negotiation process and reflect an international consensus. If you want precise answers the PPBPP are not suited for evaluation; if you want guidelines only and a framework for reference, they give sufficient direction for assessing your practice.

References:

- André, Pierre, Bert Enserink, Desmond Connor and Peter Croal, 2006. Public Participation International Best Practice Principles, *International Association for Impact Assessment Special Publication Series*, No. 4.
http://www.iaia.org/Non_Members/Pubs_Ref_Material/SP4%20web.pdf
- Enserink, B., M. Patel, N. Kranz, and J. Maestu. 2007. Cultural factors as co-determinants of participation in river basin management. *Ecology and Society* 12(2): 24. [online] URL: <http://www.ecologyandsociety.org/vol12/iss2/art24/>
- Keeney, R.L. (1992), Value-focused Thinking. A Path to Creative Decision Making, Harvard University Press, Cambridge MA/London.
- Mason, R.O. & Mitroff, I.I. (1981). *Challenging Strategic Planning Assumptions: Theory, Cases and Techniques*, New York: Wiley.
- Witteveen Loes & Bert Enserink & Rico Lie, 2006. Mediated representativity in agenda setting and policy analysis: the VPA AIDS & Rural Development, in: *Proceedings of the 26th annual conference of the International Association for Impact Assessment (IAIA) "Power, poverty and sustainability: The role of impact assessment"*, 23 – 26 May 2006, Stavanger, Norway.
- Loes Witteveen, Bert Enserink, 2007a. A ticket to India: simulating a consultancy mission with the Visual Problem Appraisal 'Kerala's Coast' In: Special Issue on Natural Resources Management of *Simulation & Gaming*, 2007; 38; 278 - 295
- Loes Witteveen and Bert Enserink, 2007b Cultural issues in Making and Using the Visual Problem Appraisal 'Kerala's Coast', *Knowledge, Technology, & Policy*, Winter 2007. Volume 19, Number 4, pp.94-118
- Loes Witteveen, Bert Enserink & Rico Lie, 2007c Mediated representativity and the International Best Practices Principles of Public Participation: assessing the Visual Problem Appraisal, Paper in *Proceedings IAIA07 Seoul*