

Contested participation: lessons from shale gas industry in Québec (Canada) for the understanding of social acceptabilityⁱ

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Social acceptability has never been so much discussed as when absent. For decision makers, the puzzle is complex: on the one hand, social acceptability is considered a «condition» for the success of their projects, on the other, the way to get it is all but clear. Participation appears to be one of the main channel allowing a grip on the complex social dynamics. Unfortunately, participation doesn't always give the fruits expected.

This was the case in Quebec (Canada), where a large strategic environmental assessment (SEA) was put in place by the provincial government in order to address the numerous questions and issues raised on the growing shale gas industry. In the original design of the SEA, a few moments were offered to opponents to be heard directly. Instead of taking it as an opportunity to make their claims, opponents contested the whole process and refused to play by the rules. More than just a strategy taken to contest the participation process, the motives live right in the heart of the history of the project and its governance. Opponents used the public participation process to make connection, to organize their voice elsewhere and to become a large territorial movement having a new powerful voice.

Through this case study, we will try to show how the effects of public participation need to be understood in relation with the specific social and institutional dynamics it is part of. As such, we will underline the idea that it is necessary to take into account participation in formal processes as well as in informal and social channels behind, in order to understand social acceptability. As well, it is necessary to put it in larger time frames, connecting the times of the project to the ones of the community and the ones of institutions governing such large scale energy projects. In order to do so, we propose a grid analysis based on a definition of social acceptability, defined as a political process. Having described this grid, we will test it with the Quebec's case study.

Social acceptability: proposal for a multilevel analysis

Social acceptability has been used more and more frequently but still remains vague, interpreted and used in many different ways. But if this notion is to have an important place in the decision-making process, as several actors wish, it would be important to better define it, both theoretically and in practice, in order to set benchmarks that will perhaps become progressively more stable and achieve greater consensus.

Scientific literature gives us some clues to face this challenge. Over the past decade, social acceptance was brought up in different ways, drawing on various assumptions. Through a reviewⁱⁱⁱ, we observed **four main changes in the literature** on wind energy that evolved rapidly.

1. After focusing on the “not in my backyard” (NIMBY) syndrome to explain opposition and the dynamics of unacceptance, new, more constructivist approaches were favoured. These no

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longer viewed technology as an objective reality but rather as an object among an ensemble of new and contextualised variables, linked to historical, geographic and social realities. For example, care for the environment is a value that has gained affirmation in contemporary society and has become increasingly institutionalized over the past 50 years. As such, renewable energy receives favorable support. Despite this, a wind farm can be viewed negatively if it threatens a valued local landscape.

2. Recent studies tend to consider the multiplicity of stake holders and scales in the articulation of energy projects, included from the public policy and the broad instruments designed by central governments until the regional planning process. Long considered as simple agents of the implementation of large national plans or the localization of projects, local and regional actors are considered more and more as playing key role in the conception of projects and their articulation with territorial dynamics.
3. The conceptions of the «social» have also changed. If researchers previously brought it up as an obstacle to projects and policies, seen as an irrational or ill-informed public, the social subject is more and more recognized as being motivated by its own logic and capable of acting independently. It can, in light of the conditions in play, encourage or block a project, ask complex questions or propose alternatives. Far from a passive subject, social actors therefore takes on multiple and complex forms (from nearby neighbours, to stake holders, interest groups and others) and as a result, understanding the varied interests and expectations becomes much more imperative.
4. Finally, it becomes pertinent to broaden the perspective beyond the “acceptance” as an individual, passive and even fixed attitude, and consider social acceptability as a collective process that could lead to projects evolving and taking different paths. An initial reaction could evolve towards a denial, or in an opposite scenario, a conflict could emerge and resorb itself.

In line with these perspectives, several factors are considered to have an influence on the dynamics of social acceptability. The challenge of conceptualisation still remains. We proposed to regroup them in three broad and distinct categories that relate to **three levels of processes** but that remain interconnected, associated with varied temporalities and forms of regulation.

- The first level, called **microsocial**, relates to social interpretation and the creation of meanings: How do individuals and groups perceive an activity, a project or a policy? How significant do they consider these to be? How do they evaluate its relevance and its place in the context of a specific territory?
- The second level, called **mesopolitical**, focuses on the dynamics of deliberation, compromise and legitimate rulemaking. How do issues emerge and (re)define themselves with time, in part due to dialogue and social interaction taken place in public participation process? In what way do the terms and dynamics of the planning process favour the flow of information and ideas in addition to the development of legitimate agreements?
- The final level, called **macroeconomic**, covers the processes that flow from long-lasting temporalities. They touch on the constitution of large social compromises that feed models of development and economic structures. How does the energy market is organised in a globalized world? What instruments are selected by governments to implement their own models? Which roles are taken by new actors (local communities, regional coalitions) in the definition of new and territorialised sociopolitical arrangements?

We hypothesize that social acceptance is achieved when these three process levels are relatively convergent. This would mean that social meanings attached to the project would align with the vision of desirable scenarios held by local communities, and that conditions would have been taken to regulate the project in accordance to these. Social acceptance is therefore defined as «a political evaluation process of a sociotechnical project putting into interaction a plurality of actors involved at different scales from which arise agreements and institutional rules deemed to be legitimate, as they are coherent with both the vision of the territory and the development model favoured by concerned actors» (Fournis et Fortin, 2013: 13).

At first sight, our definition might be read as a naïve understanding of social dynamics, assuming that such agreements could easily be reached, if well planned through a sophisticated participation process. In doing so, we would reaffirm a bias contested by social scientists (Aitken, 200). This is not the intention. We instead put the political process to the fore front in order to emphasise three ideas. 1) Conflicts: that these social negotiations take place in a complex map of values, interests at hand in such major projects. As such, they are crossed by inherent tensions that sometimes clash into conflicts; 2) Power: these processes bring together stakeholders that do not have the same abilities, capacities and resources. It is especially true in energy projects where, as international corporations often face small local communities, and thus there is a real asymmetry in the negotiation; 3) Explicit decision making process: And for such reasons, we insist that one objective of these political processes is to open and explicit the baseline of agreements and arrangements, and in order to do so, there is a need for strong governance that renders visible the choices made: by whom, for what purpose. Let's test this proposal with a case study. Let's test this proposal with a case study.

Shale gas in Quebec: from resource to threat

In 2010, Quebecers appeared to discover a new energy system: that of the shale gas. Since 2006, the ongoing exploration activities were discreet, around 30 wells had been drilled, half using hydraulic fracturing technology. The activity became more visible in the territories, under the watchful eyes of both the media and some groups of the civil society. Several aspects strongly concerned them: water availability and quality, air quality, public health, regional economy, regulatory control and the role of the government, among others. Opposition emerged rapidly in several communities, raising concerns over the number of projects.

This is not a new scenario. In Quebec, several natural resource development projects, including energy projects, are controversial. No form of energy, even renewable, seemed to escape such social dynamics that question the terms and even the fundamentals of these projects, including their ability to integrate the territories. However, this specific opposition was one of the most important in modern Quebec's environmental movement, still alive more than four years later.

A detailed exam^{iv} of how the conflict evolved, invoking key moments of the social dynamics, helps to understand the process of social acceptability in the shale gas sector and the factors influencing it. We distinguished five phases in the shaping of the «unacceptance» movement.

1. The rather discrete arrival of the business in the area, previously known only by a few key actors (elected officials and land owners for the most part), which stimulate the expectations for local economic revival and where shale gas was seen as a potential resource for the community;

2. The awakening on the part of individuals and groups now questioning the effects of its activities and raising awareness of the industrial presence;
3. The emergence of the opposition with first collective action which launched mobilization of knowledge and networks to better identify the impacts of development on local areas (most notably water and agriculture) and to discuss the dilemma this industry brings with regards to the region and the community's future;
4. The participation of citizen's committee in several forums whether formally organised or not, seeking to better understand the shale gas development process and to convince other stakeholders (inhabitants, local mayors, farmer's union) by framing the project as a threat for the well-being of communities as well as create a large coalition requiring time gain knowledge and to deliberate;
5. The enlargement of collective action under the umbrella of a new group that coordinates the efforts among several regions into a NIABY movement, and its radicalization to refuse any new hydraulic fracturing and to claim natural gas project as being "unacceptable".

The escalation of the conflict is clear. However, such development was not pre-determined, neither fixed forever. Interviewed leaders of the opposition insisted that their viewpoint on gas drilling and the industry evolved over time: going from a stance of complete openness to its implementation in certain areas, to a more reserved one and finally a firm refusal of the activity.

Such a process does not happen by accident, but rather flows from an alignment of several tangible factors. In our analysis, six factors stand out as having a strong influence on the social processes in this specific case study: the role and power of government; the decision-making process adopting the "decide, announce, defend" model ; the predominance of the "sectorial" perspective; lack of independent knowledge and expertise; absence of consideration of regional dynamics and their specificities; and uncertainty. Many relate to the process of decision making and bring to the forefront factors related to the macro level in our proposal. In brief, the process is part of the inherited Canadian's natural resources regimes which is highly centralised into the hands of State Agencies. Even if the strongest public participation procedure is put in place, such as public hearings held twice by the *Bureau des audiences publiques sur l'environnement* (BAPE) (2010; 2014), no real space is offered to local authority to be part of the decision process. To add to this, the mandates are narrowly defined, avoiding strong issues raised by opponents. In 2010, the BAPE Commission was expected to study the requests conditions for the sustainable development of the industry.

Nevertheless, citizen's committees didn't bother with such institutional constraints and raised issues such as the relevance and the desirability of this new industry for their territory. Moreover, they contested the composition of the committee responsible of leading the Strategic Environmental Assessment, and more globally the legitimacy of this exercise, even if the goal was to enriched knowledge, one of their strong concerns. In brief, they did not play by the rules. They often challenged the agenda, sometimes in a conflicting manner (strong verbal interventions), or by using symbolic strategies like exposing in the audience room large maps colored where by landowners who sign a petition to refuse the entry of the industry on the property (2012); leaving the room to render visible their «unacceptability » (2014).

Such conflicting strategies are usually not appreciated in these participation process based on collaborative interactions. It is thus tempting to interpret them as a refusal to participate. On the contrary, the large number of existing governance scenes they invested (municipal Councils;

Farmers' Union; Commission for farmland protection), including some not explicitly addressing shale gas activities tends to demonstrate the opposite: the citizen's movement took every possible opportunity to be part of the discussion, even when not invited. In this regard, this experience confirms the idea that conflict is a way of expression, used as an ultimate strategy to force a dialogue from which one feel excluded.

Still, the question remains: what are the effects, if any, of these participation mechanisms? In this specific case study, opponents used them to meet their own needs, which evolved throughout the life of the territorial mobilisation. At first, public participation helped collective action to emerge, while individuals and leaders could connect one to the other during these public events. Later on, citizen's committees largely used these opportunities to express their views, to raise issues, as thus intending to frame the activity as an undesirable one and convince other parties to ally in a large coalition. These are all contributions brought by public participation.

Conclusion

Major energy projects face great challenges before being in operation. Among other social acceptability is more and more put ahead, as a "condition" to meet. Public participation is often seen as a mean to build social acceptance. However, it is not a guarantee, as shown by the Quebec' case study and other oppositions to shale gas in other countries.

Such large conflicts might be a reminder of what the purposes of public participation are, which are to nourish the decision process and build strong and legitimate decisions. As thus, the refusal of a project is also an option for public authorities. In this manner, instead of forcing social acceptance with sophisticated engineering tools, let's follow and accompany the social process that is fundamentally based on interactions. These are sometimes conflicting, but still they are a form of engagement toward the future of the community and its territory (Szarka et al., 2012; Torre et Beuret, 2012; Walker et al., 2011).

Social acceptability is thus a pathway, which may have a long temporality (many years), with more intense moments and sudden changes. Far from a binary approach of acceptable / unacceptable, seeing social acceptability as a process seeks to valorize the essential question of political choices determining the articulation between technology and society in a specific region, overlapping various forms of regulation, market, political institutions and meanings. There are still many challenges ahead for public participation.

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ⁱⁱⁱ Among others: Aitken, 2010; Szarka et al., 2012; Wolsink, 2012; Walker et al., 2011;

^{iv} Through documentary review (media, press release, planning documents, web sites) and interviews with key actors (mayors, citizens, firm' representative, farming labor), we identify the actors, their interactions through times, the moments that signals an inflexion in the social dynamics, in line with contentious politics analysis (Tilly and Tarrow, 2007; McAdams et Boudet, 2012 ; della Porta, Piazza, 2008).