

Painting the Landscape:

A Cross-Cultural Exploration of Public-Government Decision Making

An IAP2-Kettering Research Project

Executive Summary

In 2005 the International Association for Public Participation (IAP2) and The Charles F. Kettering Foundation began work on a joint research project exploring public-government decision making in seven country/regions of the world: Africa, Asia, Australasia, Canada, Latin America, UK/Western Europe and the United States.

As a result, this monumental effort has provided those on the research team and both sponsoring organizations with a unique, cross-cultural perspective of the social, political and institutional dimensions of public participation, at the country and at the regional level. We now are pleased to share these findings with you.

Entitled “Painting the Landscape: A Cross-Cultural Exploration of Public-Government Decision Making,” this report reflects the larger strategic missions of both IAP2 and the Kettering Foundation. For IAP2, this research project lays a foundation for future research initiatives on behalf of the organization’s 1,400 members worldwide. “Painting the Landscape” also supports the Kettering Foundation’s research with professional administrators and elected and appointed public officials who value the use of key democratic practices in order to bridge the gap between the public and formal institutions of government. The findings from this study also may be useful to scholars of political science and public administration, as well as to professionals in a variety of industries whose duties call upon them to work with the public in a participatory capacity, including such professions as planning, engineering and health care, among many others.

This project presented an opportunity for IAP2 and the Kettering Foundation to gain a broader understanding of how the public is engaged in decision making and deliberative practices through processes led by government in countries around the world. The rich data that was collected paints a distinctive portrait of each country and region – distinctive because of the cultural values, traditions and histories unique to each place, and distinctive also because of the similarities in participatory practices that can be drawn across the data sample.

Moreover, IAP2 and the foundation seek through this study to provide a baseline for mapping how cultural context potentially impacts such processes. Such a comprehensive view of the data is generally absent from the scholarly and practitioner-oriented literature, except in anecdotal fashion.

In light of this shared interest in public-government decision making, this research project addresses three key research questions:

1. What does public participation/deliberation in government decision-making processes mean in different cultural contexts?
2. How do different cultures provide space for public participation/deliberation in government decision-making processes?
3. What positive and negative outcomes occur as a result of public participation/deliberation in government decision-making processes?

As a research project, it was important that this work built upon prior scholarly efforts regarding public participation practices. A detailed literature review (see pages 529-610) provided the project team and sponsors with a valuable review of existing knowledge and findings about our subject matter that also served as an essential basis upon which to structure our interview protocol. Subjects covered in this comprehensive compilation include 1) various treatments of public participation, including its relationship to politics, democracy and civil society; 2) the salience and benefits of studying public participation across cultural contexts; 3) methodological insights from comparative studies; 4) forms of public participation; and 5) expectations for and outcomes of public participation.

Interviewees detailed the design or framework for public participation processes that were used to engage citizens. Several of these correspond to the IAP2 Toolbox, including techniques that seek to share information, compile or provide feedback or bring people together. Some tools and techniques described by interviewees cross several category areas.

In order to better structure the information for the reader, several strategies/techniques were categorized in the section “How Access is Made Possible” under Research Question 2. The categories to which these strategies/techniques have been assigned (Meetings, Committees and Community Dialogue – Face to Face; Trainings, Education and Research; Information Sharing; Community Building and Partnerships; and Other) were made by the project team (and not by interviewees) as one means for organizing what appear to be like activities together.

Overall Key Findings

The following overall key findings - derived from the project’s 66 interviews with government representatives (elected officials and administrators), public participation practitioners and non-governmental organization representatives – are organized by research question.

Research Question 1:

What does public participation/deliberation in government decision-making processes mean in different cultural contexts?

Research Question 2:

How do different cultures provide space for public participation/deliberation in government decision-making processes?

Research Question 3:

What positive and negative outcomes occur as a result of public participation/deliberation in government decision-making processes?

Methodology

Working from literature review findings, field work between 2006 and 2008 included conducting semi-structured one-on-one interviews with 66 individuals in five categories – federal, state/provincial and municipal government representatives (including elected officials and administrators), public participation practitioners and non-governmental organization (NGO) representatives. *See Table 2: Methodology for more details.*

Data were collected by an 18-member team of interviewers, most of whom worked closely with a country/region coordinator (except in those instances where the interviewer also served as a regional coordinator, as was the case in the regions of Asia, Latin America - Brazil and Australasia). An interview protocol and standardized training for interviewers and country/region coordinators ensured internal validity.

Table 1: Country and Regions

Regions	Countries
Africa	Ivory Coast South Africa
Asia	Cambodia China
Australasia	Australia New Zealand
Canada	Canada
Latin America	Brazil Mexico
UK/Western Europe	Scotland Sweden
United States	United States

Table 2: Methodology

Study Design	Descriptive in nature Qualitative – Semi-structured interviews using a Strategic Questioning Framework
Countries Selected	Australia, Brazil, Cambodia, Canada, China, Ivory Coast, Mexico, New Zealand, Scotland, South Africa, Sweden, United States
Study Population	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Public sector decision makers (elected or appointed) and employees on the federal, state and local government levels Public participation practitioners Non-government sources – may be a multilateral organization (e.g. World Bank) or a third-sector/NGO organization
Inclusion Criteria	Operational or leadership positions in governmental organizations; public participation practitioners; non-governmental observers of democratic/participative systems or practices
Exclusion Criteria	Staff support positions in public sector organizations; citizens at large
Interviewee Selection	<p>Interviewees were selected based on their operational knowledge or leadership positions or as observers of democratic/participative systems or practices. Interviewees verified the eligibility of candidates prior to submission for review and approval by the project coordinator based on the established criteria.</p> <p>Efforts were made to ensure ethnic and gender diversity to the degree possible as part of the candidate selection process to encourage a range of voices, perspectives and experiences was included in the study sample. In some instances subjects that interviewers wished to interview were not available and substitutions were made appropriately from a list of alternates.</p> <p>Interviewees were sent an email letter requesting their participation in the study and providing additional study background. When necessary, the letter of invitation was translated into the subject's native language.</p>
Study Procedures	The interview protocol was pre-tested
Confidentiality	All interviews are confidential
Data Analysis	Qualitative software analysis and also reflective analysis of transcripts by interviewers and regional coordinators
Sample Size	<p>66 interviews</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> 10 interviews per region for Africa (Ivory Coast and South Africa – 5 interviews each), Australasia (Australia and New Zealand), Latin America (Brazil and Mexico – 5 interviews each), UK/Western Europe, United States 6 interviews for Asia (3 for Cambodia, 4 for China) 9 interviews for Canada
Interviewer Selection	Interviewers were selected based on the following criteria: familiarity with p2 practices, existing relationships with prospective interview candidates within their respective country and experience with qualitative research methods.
Categories for Analysis	See the addendum for the categories used to analyze project data

(based on a protocol by M. Boulvain)

Countries selected for this study were generally chosen based on two key factors: first, the geographic location of interviewers and second, the existence of established relationships between interviewers and potential interview subjects in that country. Effort was made to include as broad a cross-section of countries as was possible under the limitations of the project budget. One country initially chosen – Thailand – experienced a military coup that caused the project subcommittee to withdraw it from the project sample in 2007. *See Table 1, Country/Regions Included for a complete list of country/regions included in this study.*

The project team initially focused on studying a select number of countries. However, the team decided to expand the number of countries included after receiving expressions of interviewer interest across several countries, and realizing the potential value of expanding the data collection accordingly. There was interest in the potential for assessing participatory practices in long-established democracies (such as Canada, Australia and the United States) as well as both in those countries with political systems that are not organized democracies (e.g. China) and those where democratic practices may be considered limited or less robust¹ (such as Cambodia, Ivory Coast and Thailand).

Interviewees were selected based on their operational knowledge or leadership positions or as observers of democratic/participative systems or practices. Interviewees verified the eligibility of candidates prior to submission for review and approval by the project coordinator based on the established criteria. Efforts were made to ensure ethnic and gender diversity to the degree possible as part of the candidate selection process to encourage a range of voices, perspectives and experiences was included in the study sample.

Once the data was analyzed, an initial draft report was prepared by Beth Offenbacher that responded to the three research questions. It was subsequently determined that having country reports, instead of an overall report that collapsed all country findings under the three research questions, was preferable. Beth Offenbacher and Shareen Springer prepared country reports, which then were distributed for review and comment by country coordinators and interviewers. IAP2 Executive Director Moira Deslandes played a key role in providing external review and comment on the reports and guiding the review process. The final country reports were revised by Beth Offenbacher to reflect comments received.

See sections of this report entitled “Methodology” and “How the IAP2-KF Project Subcommittee Coordinated This Study” for additional details about how the subcommittee structured and completed this project.

¹ The Economist Intelligence Unit’s index of democracy, 2007; Freedom House Freedom in the World Report, 2009.

Limitations

Limitations to this research project include:

- The age of the data at this writing (interviews were collected between 2006 and 2008)
- Dates in the past that were referred to by interviewees
- Difficulty gaining interviewee commitment to participate for some candidates (legal, logistical)
- Ability for some interviewees for whom english is a second language to fully comprehend questions included in the semi-structured interview instrument
- The size of the sample, which is small and not intended to be representative but rather a descriptive study that provides an interpretive lens for how public participation takes place in different cultures and communities
- Finally, efforts have been made to control for bias in research design, data collection and interpretation but we acknowledge that despite these efforts it still may be present

Further Research

IAP2 and the Kettering Foundation have identified several potential questions and puzzles for continued research in this vein, using the existing data that has been collected or supplementing this data.

Recommendations include more in-depth focus on who is involved in p2 processes, how p2 processes are implemented and for what purpose, more definition and exploration of outcomes and enhanced consideration of differences and similarities across cultures, regions, countries, etc. as it relates to p2 processes.

See “Recommendations for Further Research” on page 527 for more information about the specific subjects under consideration.

Respectfully Submitted,
The IAP2-KF Project Subcommittee