



How does the context and design of participatory decision-making processes affect their outcomes? Evidence from sustainable land management in global drylands.

Joris de Vente (1), Mark Reed (2), Lindsay Stringer (3), Sandra Valente (4), and Jens Newig (5)

(1) Centro de Edafología y Biología Aplicada del Segura, Consejo Superior de Investigaciones Científicas (CEBAS-CSIC), Soil and Water Conservation Department, Murcia, Spain (joris@cebas.csic.es), (2) Birmingham City University, School of the Built Environment, United Kingdom, (3) Sustainability Research Institute, School of Earth and Environment, University of Leeds, United Kingdom, (4) Centre for Environmental and Marine Studies, Departamento de Ambiente e Ordenamento, University of Aveiro, Portugal, (5) Leuphana University Lüneburg, Institute for Environmental and Sustainability Communication and Center for the Study of Democracy, Germany

It is widely accepted that the design of participatory processes in environmental management needs to be adapted to local contexts. Yet, it is not clear which elements of process design are universal, making it difficult to design processes that deliver beneficial outcomes across different contexts. We used empirical evidence to analyse the extent to which context and process design can enable or impede stakeholder participation and facilitate beneficial environmental and social outcomes in a range of decision-making contexts where stakeholders are engaged in environmental management. To explore the role of national-scale context on the outcomes of participatory processes, we interviewed facilitators from a process that was replicated across 13 dryland study sites around the world, which focussed on selecting Sustainable Land Management (SLM) options in close collaboration with stakeholders. To explore the role of process design and local context, we interviewed participants and facilitators in 11 case studies in Spain and Portugal in which different process designs were used. Interview data were analysed using a combination of quantitative and qualitative approaches to characterise relationships between process design, context and process outcomes. The similarity of outcomes across the 13 international study sites suggested that the national socio-cultural context in which a participatory process is conducted has little impact on its outcomes. However, analysis of cases from Spain and Portugal showed that some aspects of local context may affect outcomes. Having said this, factors associated with process design and participant selection played a more significant role in influencing outcomes in both countries. Processes that led to more beneficial outcomes for the environment and/or participants were likely to include: the legitimate representation of stakeholders; professional facilitation including structured methods for eliciting and aggregating information and balancing power dynamics between participants; and the provision of information and decision-making power to all participants. Participatory processes initiated or facilitated by government bodies led to significantly less trust, information gain, learning, and flexible solutions. However, in these processes, decisions were more acceptable to and likely to be implemented by governments and by those who had to apply them on the ground. These findings provide a solid empirical basis for best practice in the design of participatory processes in SLM in a number of contexts internationally, which if followed, increase the likelihood of providing beneficial environmental and social outcomes for those involved.