



# Evaluating participatory decision processes: Which methods inform reflective practice?



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## ABSTRACT

Evaluating participatory decision processes serves two key purposes: validating the usefulness of specific interventions for stakeholders, interveners and funders of conflict management processes, and improving practice. However, evaluation design remains challenging, partly because when attempting to serve both purposes we may end up serving neither well. In fact, the better we respond to one, the less we may satisfy the other. Evaluations tend to focus on endogenous factors (e.g., stakeholder selection, BATNAs, mutually beneficial tradeoffs, quality of the intervention, etc.), because we believe that the success of participatory decision processes hinges on them, and they also seem to lend themselves to *caeteris paribus* statistical comparisons across cases. We argue that context matters too and that contextual differences among specific cases are meaningful enough to undermine conclusions derived solely from comparisons of process-endogenous factors implicitly rooted in the *caeteris paribus* assumption. We illustrate this argument with an environmental mediation case. We compare data collected about it through surveys geared toward comparability across cases to information elicited through in-depth interviews geared toward case specifics. The surveys, designed by the U.S. Institute of Environmental Conflict Resolution, feed a database of environmental conflicts that can help make the (statistical) case for intervention in environmental conflict management. Our interviews elicit case details – including context – that enable interveners to link context specifics and intervention actions to outcomes. We argue that neither approach can “serve both masters.”

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It is a very difficult job, being the servant of two masters  
Arllecchino, in Carlo Goldoni's "The servant of two masters,"  
1745

## 1. Introduction

Evaluation of participatory processes is a source of insights for improving practice, as well as a basis for validating the usefulness of interventions for stakeholders, funders, and more generally the field of conflict management and participatory public decision making. Decision processes are participatory if they include representation of stakeholding interests ranging from public agencies to business, industry, and various public interest groups. Over the past 30 years, evaluation of such processes has evolved in

several directions. Bingham's (1986) early effort documented whether intervention – mediation or facilitation – had been used, and the rate of reaching agreement; Beierle and Cayford (2002) considered an eclectic mix of 239 documented cases of public participation, including dispute resolution cases, and analyzed what each case achieved along dimensions of democratic governance. Planning scholars have used both survey and interview data to evaluate collaborative decision making processes (e.g., Mandarano, 2008; Shively, 2007; Slotterback, 2008). Some researchers (e.g., O'Sullivan, 2012) differentiate participatory evaluation approaches by the extent to which stakeholders are involved in the evaluation process. To reduce the variability deriving from the nature of the issues under dispute (a confounding factor in earlier efforts), some evaluators have focused on conflicts over specific resources: water (d'Estree & Colby, 2003; Scholz & Stiftel, 2005), waste management (Susskind and Ozawa, 1983), resources management (Conley & Moote, 2003) or enforcement (Siegel, 2007). Others have focused on specific geographical areas such as Florida (Sipe & Stiftel, 1995), Georgia (Elliott & Stiftel, 2005) or Ontario (Andrew, 2001). Perhaps the most notable effort comes from the U.S. Institute of Environmental

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Conflict Resolution (USIECR). In the early 2000s, USIECR initiated an ambitious project to design an evaluation model and assemble a database on cases across the US for systematic assessment of participatory environmental conflict resolution processes.

Evaluation informs participatory and intervention practices by surfacing linkages between participants' and interveners' actions and outcomes. It can generate systematic reflection, but only if intentionally structured and conducted for this purpose (e.g., Cousins & Earl, 1992). In turn, reflection can play a key role in improving conflict management and participatory decisions processes. Evaluation results are thus essential for reflective practice – developing the knowledge necessary to design, implement and recalibrate these processes. Evaluation becomes, inevitably, a political act when it serves other purposes, such as promoting, enhancing or funding participatory processes for resolving public disputes by means deemed more effective than litigation. Researchers already acknowledge that "...evaluation approaches will necessarily vary with the evaluation's intent..." (Conley & Moote, 2003). We ask here whether one evaluation approach can "serve two masters" – informing intervention practice in participatory decision processes and providing evidence that on average such processes are more successful than others in managing conflict around public decisions and are therefore worthy of political and financial support.

Although project evaluation is an established practice in other areas, the fields of participatory processes and conflict management are still coming to terms with evaluation as a routine project component. Consequently, it is mostly summative (Kaufman and Gray, 2003; Elliott et al., 2003; Susskind, van der Wansem, & Ciccarelli, 2000), whether performed immediately or well after a project's conclusion. Evaluation requires a clear sense of: outcomes sought and how they are to be used, intended audiences, who might best conduct the evaluation, and necessary tools and techniques (e.g., O'Leary & Bingham, 2003). Effort and resources are spent developing data collection instruments flexible enough to be used in a broad range of contexts and to serve multiple audiences and purposes, but perhaps serving none very well. The understandable quest for broad applicability and comparability may foster focus on what is shared by many if not most cases: several participants, sometimes interveners, and a process of interaction around the issues at stake. This focus on commonalities requires stripping of situational factors that might reduce comparability, and a belief that *caeteris paribus* statements can be meaningful.

Situation specifics, however, may help account for much of the observed processes and outcomes. This should not surprise: many differences between two decision processes about similar issues and/or involving similar casts of characters are in the contexts. For example, water-related disputes in arid Colorado or water-abundant Ohio can proceed very differently; land use disputes in Oregon, with its planning and participatory traditions, unfold differently from disputes around similar issues in states where property rights trump planning concerns. Even within Oregon, disputes at different times may unfold differently depending on the political constellation of the moment. In general, even if some situation components are frequently shared, together they make for unique cases.

Context information is necessary not only for understanding why participatory processes succeed or fail, but also for developing skills for successfully contending with new situations. Observed process events and outcomes rarely hinge only on the direct participants' and interveners' moves. Contextual factors such as institutions, local histories and past interactions color present relationships, perspectives and understandings (e.g., Jackson & Kolla, 2012). Framing and analyzing participatory decision cases strictly in terms of internal process dynamics lead us to ascribe to

them everything we observe. Explaining outcomes only in terms endogenous to the processes that produced them leaves us in the dark about why some processes succeed and some fail despite their apparent similarity of issues, stakeholders, interveners and approaches. We argue that it is not possible to fully understand decision processes or to draw lessons for intervention practice without linking them to the contexts that shaped them.

An opportunity arose to test our conjecture about the limited usefulness to practice of evaluation surveys rooted in the *caeteris paribus* assumption, and to explore an alternative approach. The Oregon Consensus (OC) Program at Portland State University contributed 10 participatory decision making cases to the USIECR database. It then sought to derive some lessons for its mediation practices.

In use since 2005, USIECR's was the first large-scale database to enable inter-case evaluative comparisons. The intent was to "generate valuable data bases from application of the framework by public agencies and other organizations." The USIECR sought to accumulate information from numerous cases about many dimensions including location, issues, scale, duration, number and nature of participants, type and quality of the intervention. The data are endogenous to the processes by design, as expressed in the primary objective "to serve as the core organizing element for a program evaluation system for routine and systematic case evaluations... [with] a focus on conditions and factors that can influence outcomes over which there might some program control" (Orr, Emerson, & Keyes, 2008, p. 285).

We report here on an exploration of how evaluation can be used to inform future participatory efforts and foster reflective intervention practices. We sought to characterize the extent and kinds of information helpful in understanding what did/did not work in specific processes and why, at process stages from assessment to the implementation of agreements.

Since this is admittedly a tall order, we began by assessing which current evaluation practices already serve this purpose partially or entirely. We focused the USIECR survey instrument because numerous leading conflict management researchers and practitioners contributed to its design. Being at the cutting edge of comparative evaluation, it is a logical term of comparison for exploring how such instruments can enhance understanding and improve participatory and intervention practices. Its designers hoped to serve two purposes: make the case for funding participatory processes and also help illuminate and improve intervention and participatory practices by revealing recurring practice patterns in successful and failed cases. We selected one Oregon Consensus case – Aggregate Mining (AM) – that had been entered into the USIECR database. We outline it briefly, and describe and discuss its USIECR results. We compare these to insights we gained from conducting interviews with some of the participants and interveners, to assess what each approach can contribute to process evaluation, and especially to improving participatory practice. We derive a set of lessons learned from the analysis of this case through survey and interview lenses.

## 2. The Aggregate Mining case

We focused on one state (Oregon) and one facilitating organization (Oregon Consensus, OC) in order to reduce contextual variability from case to case. The OC cases share location, political and legal environment, a relatively narrow time period, the OC facilitators, and occasionally even a few participants. We expected the shared context to allow us to pinpoint sources of process and outcome variations due to case specifics.

After examining the 10 OC cases entered in the USIECR database, we selected the Aggregate Mining (AM) mediated decision process of 2005–2007. It attracted our attention for

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