



## Methodological and Ideological Options

# Background inequality and differential participation in deliberative valuation: Lessons from small-group discussions on forest conservation in Colombia



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## ABSTRACT

Deliberative monetary valuation (DMV) methods have been proposed as a more democratic alternative to traditional contingent valuation methods (CVM) for natural- resource decision making. These deliberative methods are subject to criticisms. One issue of concern is that the socio-economic inequalities among members of the deliberative group may severely impede communication and consequently distort deliberative outcomes. To examine such possibility we applied the deliberative methodology in a case study of forest conservation in Colombia. We found that those individuals who assumed social (environmental) leadership positions tended to dominate group discussion. Nevertheless, the variations in the capacity to engage in group deliberation were better explained by participants' personal characteristics than external constraints or group pressure. Also, there was little evidence that leadership and domination in group deliberation significantly influenced participants' stated WTP. We conclude that DMV is vulnerable to the background inequalities among group members. The democratic potential of deliberative methods should be critically examined in terms of the capacity to communicate effectively and equally.

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## 1. Introduction

In a typical study using the contingent valuation method (CVM) researchers collect data from individuals in isolation. Standard surveys are administered in a setting that prevents respondents from sharing their opinions and perspectives with each other. Neoclassical theory states that there is no need for social interaction because individual preferences are what matters when assessing the desirability of collective decisions. If people have access to, and an understanding of, the relevant information and the valuation scenario is adequately designed, respondents are likely to offer meaningful and truthful responses derived from well-formed preferences. In contrast, deliberative valuation methods are advocated on the assumption that social interaction is necessary for producing better collective decisions (Bromley, 2004; Söderbaum and Brown, 2010).

Deliberative monetary valuation (DMV) combines economic and political processes to place a monetary value on environmental goods and services. Participants are asked to state, individually or collectively,

their willingness to pay (WTP) after participating in a deliberation. The monetary value obtained is meant to be used in environmental assessments, however, these figures do not lend themselves to a single interpretation (Spash, 2008). One of the aims of DMV is to increase the legitimacy and fairness of collective decisions (Lo, 2014; Vargas et al., in press; Wilson and Howarth, 2002) through participation in an open, inclusive and reciprocal dialogue among free and equal citizens (Cohen, 1989).

Some theorists believe that deliberative approaches for decision making are superior on political grounds to standard economic methods to the extent in which they recognize the use and expression of the reason when citizens advocate or reject a change in practice or policy. Using the state of Oregon health care consultations in the early 1990s Gutmann and Thompson (2004) shows how a prioritized list of health services based on cost-benefit calculations was opposed by citizens because they believed that the resulting ranking was not fair or right. Rejection which led to a consultation process that produced a revised list which was considered an improvement over the original one. Similarly, Dietz et al. (2009) and Vargas (2015) show that in relation to standard valuation methods the reasons accompanying monetary values expressed after deliberation reflect a greater concern for the equity issues of the policy proposal.

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Deliberative methods, however, are subject to criticisms. Some critics argue that the socially more influential participants tend to dominate discussions, i.e. deliberation favors those who are most educated and who possess higher social standing (Young, 2000). In this sense, deliberation is influenced by society's structural inequalities which "inhibit the political participation of some citizens with formal equal rights at the same time that they relatively empower others" (Young, 2000, p. 34). This gives rise to the "internal" exclusion phenomenon in deliberation. People are internally excluded because they lack the opportunity to influence the thinking of others. In a similar vein O'Neill and Spash (2000) discuss the "ability to say" issue. Communicative exclusion arises from the uneven distribution of the capacity to speak and to be heard. This uneven capacity can be due to variations in the level of education and the ability to use formal languages (Spash, 2007).

Uneven participation can also lead to the risk that attitudes expressed after deliberation will converge toward those of the more influential participants (Sunstein, 2004). Consequently, collective decisions are less likely to be informed by reflective preferences. Unreasoned conformity, instead, could prevail (Luskin et al., 2002). The variations in the capacity to engage in group deliberation could therefore compromise DMV's capacity to achieve its democratic potential. In the same vein, scholars from the community-based development field warn that participatory spaces which intend to democratize the decision making process sometimes fail in mitigating the opportunism of prominent members of the community, thus providing opportunities for the elite to capture the process (Platteau, 2004).

Here we draw on Sen's (1999) capability approach to analyze the DMV alternative in terms of people's capacity to participate in public discussion. An important implication of this approach is that it highlights the central relevance of capability inequality, but does not, by itself, lead us to demand capability equality, as some have suggested (Wilson and Howarth, 2002). Based on this we argue that we should not expect, nor demand, equal participation in deliberation. Nevertheless, participation inequality could be mostly explained by personal characteristics, rather than social circumstances.

We use an empirical DMV study to examine people's patterns of participation in discussion and relate their participatory activity to their socio-economic characteristics. Our aim is to determine if socially advantaged individuals tend to dominate discussions. Specifically, we (a) examine whether individual participation during deliberation is related to socio-economic characteristics (i.e. leadership, education, income, gender); (b) analyze participation inequality to examine the extent to which it is explained by socio-economic conditions; and (c) examine the effect of participation inequality on the expressed WTP.

Citizens were gathered to discuss a Payment for Ecosystems Services (PES) program, which would be used for conserving the last remnants of tropical dry forest (TDF) in the Colombian Caribbean. We assessed the level of participation in terms of frequency and length of participants' interventions in group discussion. We administered a survey for collecting responses regarding peoples' willingness to fund the PES program and their socio-economic characteristics and conducted statistical analysis. In addition, we recorded the group deliberations and analyzed transcripts of the recordings.

## 2. Citizen Participation in Deliberation

Deliberative democracy theorists usually argue that ordinary citizens should have the opportunity to take part in deliberation, ideally on an equal footing (Steiner, 2012). Equality in participation requires that no one person dominates the deliberative process, irrespective of differences in power and prestige (Thompson, 2008). One of the challenges of deliberation arises when the concept of democratic discussion is equated to critical argument (Young, 2000). Young (1996) argues that this is a culturally biased conception of deliberation that tends to silence or devalue some people or groups. For example, those with higher education and income levels, those who are males and those with a special

social status are expected to have the greatest influence in collective group deliberations. How does this critique relate to the normative DMV frameworks that have been proposed?

### 2.1. Capabilities and Deliberation<sup>1</sup>

Citizens demonstrate varying capacities to engage in public debates and everyday discussions, implying that those less vocal and proficient in verbal communication might be excluded from effective participation in deliberation (O'Neill et al., 2008; Spash, 2007). Identifying the source of those disparities is important because it sheds some light on the ways in which disadvantages can be rectified, as well as the degree to which this is feasible and desirable. As previously mentioned, Sen (2009, p. 232) argues that the capability perspective highlights the central relevance of the inequality of capabilities in the assessment of social disparities, but does not demand that we endorse policies aimed at equalising everyone's capabilities.

One of the basic capabilities, necessary for avoiding or escaping poverty, is that of political participation. For deliberation it means being capable of engaging in public discussion, i.e. to be communicatively competent. The degree to which an individual becomes communicatively competent depends upon both the presence of the necessary resources (e.g. schooling) and the extent to which these resources can be converted into a capability. Sen (1999) distinguishes different sources of variation between resources and the advantages individuals get from them. First are personal heterogeneities or conversion factors (e.g. physical condition, cognitive and non-cognitive skills). Second are social factors that shape the context in which the individual employs their resources and makes choices. The norms regulating communication and admissible forms of knowledge are an important factor in deliberations. Finally, relational perspectives are those factors that influence how the individual understands his/her relative position in society, for example, social norms and conventions that define gender roles or discriminating practices.

In deliberation, the element that connects these three sets of factors is communication. The degree to which one can be considered communicatively competent depends to a certain extent on the kind of communication deemed admissible. DMV approaches that are based on the Kantian ideal of the public use of reason restrict deliberation to a process of reasoned argumentation. Thus, communicative competence is set in advance and people's capacity to deliberate is judged according to standards of adequacy external to the actual deliberative practice. By this account, a person becomes a better deliberator by acquiring those resources which can improve his/her argumentative performance. Consequently, there has been a call for institutions to correct disparities in the allocation of relevant resources (e.g. income, opportunities, rights and entitlements) or to only grant access to deliberation to the most capable individuals (Bohman, 1997).

The problem with the emphasis on redressing resource inequalities is that it ignores how people differ in their ability to convert resources into communicative competence. Different levels of skills related to cognition and communication prevent individuals from achieving an equal level of communicative competence even if they are granted the same resources (Bohman, 1997). The point is that resource equality does not translate into capability equality. In some circumstances disadvantages cannot be fully "corrected" (Sen, 1999).

A more inclusive DMV approach is one that does not assume that citizens are similarly situated and capable of making use of all their opportunities and resources. In this approach, the idea of communicative competence emerges from the interplay between the communicative practices of those who deliberate and their personal characteristics and resources. Therefore, there are not a priori restrictions on the type of communication deemed deliberative. The emphasis is on the capacity

<sup>1</sup> A more elaborated discussion of the arguments presented in this section can be found in (Vargas et al., in press).

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