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Beyond the manual: Practicing deliberative visioning in a Greek island

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ABSTRACT

Deliberative visioning refers to processes of inclusive, multi-stakeholder deliberation over a desirable future. Methodologies include scenario workshops, future searches and community visioning. This paper looks critically at the assumptions of deliberative visioning benefiting from a case study in Greece. We argue that there are fundamental choices to be made concerning how to frame the process, who to invite and how to facilitate it. These are not just a matter of following manuals' good practice guidance. We emphasize the need for epistemological and methodological awareness of: the assumptions which frame DV itself; the assumptions of the users of DV; and the situation in which DV is deployed. We find that whereas visioning motivates participants to work together and provides a good framework to systematize discussion, it is not necessarily effective for developing systemic perspectives and plan actions. This is especially true in contexts such as that of our case study, where there is lack of a collaborative culture and there are insufficient mechanisms that integrate effectively a deliberative process with other processes of policy or social change.

1. Introduction

There is a recent proliferation of policy processes that combine inclusive deliberation with visioning. Puglisi and While (2004) talk of a "futures turn in European governance". The Water Framework Directive (WFD), a model for future EU environmental policy is a notable example (van der Helm, 2003; Hatzilacou et al., 2007). Plein et al. (1998) note a similar trend in the U.S.

There are several methodologies for deliberative visioning (DV). Among others these include scenario workshops (SWs) (Andersen and Jaeger, 1999; Street, 1997), future search (FS) conferences (Weisbord and Janoff, 2000; Weisbord, 1993) and community visioning (CV) (Oregon, 1993; National Civic League, 2000; Walzer, 1996). Ecological economists have noted some advantages of DV compared to conventional decision processes (Costanza et al., 1997; Farley and Costanza, 2002; Ravetz, 1999) but there has been scant critical appraisal of actual applications. This is symptomatic of a lack of genuine reflection in DV literature (Shipley, 2002). DV practitioners often claim that they are doing something new (e.g. Weisbord

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and Janoff, 2000; National Civic League, 2000), yet the first applications date back to the 1970s (Shipley, 2002). There are plenty of manuals for "how to do" a DV, but few evaluate whether the "beliefs … of conventional wisdom" about the proclaimed advantages of the process are confirmed in practice (Shipley, 2002, pp. 8). DV methodologies "are described in books or articles whose main purpose is to encourage the reader to hire the services of the practitioner concerned" and evaluations are like "advertisements rather than analytical discussions" (Shipley, 2002, p.8). Our research aims to go beyond the manual and contribute to a critical examination of DV (see also Shipley, 2002), benefiting from a case study conducted in Greece.

Section 2 reviews the main DV methodologies. Section 3 discusses the underlying assumptions of DV and some theoretical criticisms, identifying the questions motivating this paper. Section 4 describes briefly the case study and Section 5 discusses it with respect to the research questions. The paper concludes recognizing the limitations and potential contribution of DV.

2. Deliberative visioning

Deliberative visioning is a process of inclusive, multi-stakeholder deliberation over a desirable future (Weisbord and Janoff, 2000). Deliberation refers to a facilitated, language-based interaction that allows a reevaluation of participants' viewpoints (Holmes and Scoones, 2000). DV is typically a two-staged process consisting of vision-making and action planning. In vision-making participants deliberate over and agree on a vision about the issue under question (e.g. a vision for a sustainable city in the year 2020). In action planning, they discuss how to achieve the vision. They deposit ideas for action and then elaborate in detail the implementation of the most popular ones.

Table 1 compares the main methodologies. These differ in terms of the facilitation tools they use, the number of participants, and their duration.

In SWs organizers prepare four alternative scenarios for the workshop. Participants discuss them during the first day, formulating their own desirable scenario and expressing it into a vision (Andersen and Jaeger, 1999). The second day they propose ideas for achieving the vision and vote for the best five on whose implementation they work in more detail (Street, 1997). The final result is an Action Plan with a scheduled implementation of tasks for each of the top 5 ideas.

The first day of FS in comparison includes a review of past personal and community milestones, an identification of external forces shaping the present, a reflection of participants on their collective "prouds and sorries" and finally a short vision statement (Weisbord and Janoff, 2000). During the second day participants break down the vision statement into a few subtasks and are free to choose which one they want to work on, upon the premise that they will be engaged in its implementation after the workshop.

Both methodologies involve group and assembly discussions, presentations, and playful activities managed by professional facilitators. Organizers frame the goals of the process and select participants, in consultation with an initial steering group. Participants are typically stakeholders representing broader constituencies.

SW and FS last 2 days (plus a "warming-up" 1/2 day afternoon). In comparison, CV is a longer process including 1-day (or longer) visioning and action planning workshops. These are complemented by separate events (e.g. scanning of community problems) and in-between subcommittee meetings (e.g. preparing civic indicators) (NCL, 2000).

SW involves 36 participants working in four stakeholder groups: policy-makers, business representatives, scientists and citizens. FS accommodates 80+ participants, working in several stakeholder groups (8+). CV involves more community members and there have been CVs with 200+ participants.

3. Assumptions of DV and criticism

Beyond differences, DV methodologies share some common premises. A central tenet is that all community interests should be included in the process and a level playing field provided where all participants (politicians, businessmen, scientists, underrepresented minorities, etc) have equal rights.

Visioning plays a multi-faceted role. First, psychologically, it liberates discussion from the burden of the present. Participants work together to imagine a desirable future. This helps them forget present differences and motivates

Table 1 – Comparison of three deliberative visioning methods

Method	Tools	Deliverables	Duration	Participants	More info
SW	Scenarios Facilitated group discussion	Future scenario Vision statement Action Plan	2–2.5 days	Stakeholders 36 max.	www.cordis.lu/easw
FS	Milestone map Mind map Facilitated group discussion	Vision statement Implementation programme and partnerships	2–2.5 days	Stakeholders 40–80+	www.futuresearch.net
CV	Community scanning Scenarios Indicators Facilitated meetings and sub-group committees	Civic index Vision statement Key performance areas Implementation plan	5 events (1–2 days each) and in-between work	Stakeholders and individuals 200+	www.ncl.org