



# Public participation and local environmental planning: Testing factors influencing decision quality and implementation in four case studies from Germany



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## ABSTRACT

Public and stakeholder participation in environmental planning is often assumed to enhance effectiveness through improving the environmental quality of decisions and enhancing implementation. We draw on the literature on participatory environmental governance in order to derive key participation-related factors that are hypothesized to impact on decision quality and implementation. We then outline four cases of decision-making processes in local environmental planning in Germany, representing a variety of forms of public participation, and what we suggest can be seen as four different pathways to 'success' in participatory planning. The case studies, recounted on the basis of stakeholder interviews and secondary research, are subjected to a cross-case analysis in order to examine the influence of participation in each case. We consider how key participation-related factors played out across the cases, and assess both decision quality and implementation against counterfactual non-participatory, or less-participatory, scenarios. In moving beyond accounts of 'what happened', and considering how participation changed the order of things relative to 'what would have happened' under different scenarios, the research highlights how very different pathways may lead to 'success' in participatory environmental planning from the viewpoint of process organizers and planners sympathetic to environmental issues. We conclude that, given the significance of context and surprises, planners and process organizers must be open to different pathways to the successful conclusion of participatory planning processes.

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## Introduction

Environmental governance, especially in Western democracies, increasingly relies on participation of citizens' groups and non-governmental organizations. Participation is valued for its potential to enhance the effectiveness of governance by improving the environmental quality of decisions and enhancing compliance and implementation (Beierle and Cayford, 2002; Dietz and Stern, 2008; Reed, 2008; Newig and Fritsch, 2009; Høgl et al., 2012). This 'instrumental claim,' however, can be and is being contested on theoretical and empirical grounds. It will therefore be crucial to determine whether, and under what conditions, participatory governance improves the level of environmental protection or nature conservation, compared with more traditional modes of governance

(Newig, 2012). Scholarly debate persists as to the consequences of public participation for both decision quality and implementation (Bulkeley and Mol, 2003). A number of empirical studies have shown that more effective policy-making is not assured (e.g. Coglianesi, 1999; Wolf, 2006; Layzer, 2008; Newig and Fritsch, 2009; Coenen et al., 1998). In some cases participation can indeed result in inferior decisions and poor implementation – i.e. less effective environmental protection – as compared to non-participatory decision making.

How to resolve this puzzle? Arguably, the 'success' of participation measured in environmental terms depends on various aspects of the wider context within which processes are situated and, importantly, on characteristics of participatory processes themselves, such as inclusion and influence of different interest groups. This paper studies whether and how participation influences (1) the environmental quality of decisions and (2) the quality of implementation. To this end, we conducted original field research on four case studies of participatory decision-making processes in Germany. While these processes took distinctly different pathways, all proved rather 'successful' in terms of the environmental

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quality of outputs secured and of implementation. The paper studies these pathways to 'success', and compares how these were shaped by participation-related factors. In the *Theoretical background* section, we develop a number of testable hypotheses derived from the literature that link participation with environmental outputs and outcomes. The *Methodology* section describes the methods employed. Section *Introduction to the case studies* then outlines the four case studies, selected from processes of public environmental decision making in Germany over the decade to 2010. Building on the theoretical framework developed in the *Theoretical background* section, the *Cross-case analysis* section presents a cross-case analysis of factors influencing environmental quality of decision and implementation, before the paper concludes with discussion and conclusions.

### Theoretical background: hypothesized impacts of participation on decision quality and implementation

In order to allow for generalizable findings, we embed the empirical analysis into the literature on participation in (environmental) governance. To this end, we present and discuss a number of participation-related factors that figure prominently in the literature, which are expected to influence the quality and implementation of decisions. These will guide the analysis, notably in the *Cross-case analysis* section.

There has been debate on what 'quality' of environmental decision-making should mean. Commentators have asserted the importance of different aspects ranging from process characteristics (such as fairness and competence) to issues of equity, acceptability and common-good orientation of outputs (Coenen et al., 1998). Addressing the claim that participation can improve environmental protection, we focus here on the environmental 'quality' of decisions, that is, the degree to which environmental considerations are present in a plan, and the extent to which the plan aims to improve environmental conditions. With respect to implementation we focus on the extent to which the environmental considerations of a decision are being, or will actually be, implemented (rather than the 'successful' implementation of a project as such, which could be detrimental to the environment).

The factors we identify in this section reflect prominent claims and hypotheses from the literature on the relationship between participation and environmental quality of decisions and their implementation. Building on earlier attempts to systematize assumptions on how participation may benefit the environment (Fritsch and Newig, 2012), we seek to provide an empirically useful framework for analysis. Each of the factors presented below constitutes, strictly speaking, a pair of related hypotheses of the type (1) *participation leads to factor A*, and (2) *A leads to improved environmental decision quality or implementation, respectively* (Newig et al., 2013). Due to the close interrelation between these 'steps', we present pairs of hypotheses around a specific factor as a unity rather than splitting them up. It should be kept in mind, however, that while in a given case participation may lead to factor A, this, in turn, may not benefit the environment (and vice versa). In this sense, each of the factors outlined below also implies counter-hypotheses. Some of the factors also rely on others, which we mention where applicable. In our empirical analysis in the *Cross-case analysis* section we will again consider these disaggregated hypotheses.

#### Factors influencing decision quality

##### Influence of environmental interests

Public participation can improve the environmental standard of a decision through the inclusion of groups or individuals that represent environmental values and interests (including but not limited

to environmental NGOs). However, existing research suggests that on local or regional levels, where participatory processes are usually conducted, interests tend to focus on short-term horizons and participants often favor development interests (Koontz, 1999; Newig and Fritsch, 2009). Environmental groups at local levels therefore often have less influence in participatory processes compared to other groups, because they are relatively under-resourced. In the course of negotiating and bargaining, the environmental standard of a decision may thus be lowered via the influence of privileged economic interest groups (Wolf, 2006; Rockloff and Moore, 2006). This suggests that environmental concerns may often be better safeguarded at higher (administrative) levels, or via non-participatory decision making.

Simply opening up a decision-making process to environmental groups is thus often insufficient to improve environmental standards of decisions, especially where these groups possess fewer power resources compared to other stakeholders. On one hand, participation can alter the institutional position of environmental groups – they may be compelled to act less confrontationally, in the interests of consensus-building and progress toward a decision. On the other hand, this may also be seen as undermining environmental groups through their co-option into a general 'development' frame, demanding compromises and precluding more ambitious targets (Boström, 2003).

##### Provision of 'lay' knowledge

Public participation is also credited with eliciting 'lay' knowledge and perspectives not otherwise readily available to experts. Such knowledge may increase understanding or serve as a quality check on expert knowledge, for the benefit of the environment (Cowie and O'Toole, 1998; Layzer, 2002; Webler and Tuler, 2000). However, in some cases the public is not considered sufficiently informed or competent to consult on policy issues. Often problems are considered too complicated to leave to public decision making, which is seen by some as replacing expertise with mere opinion (Posner, 2004).

##### Development of innovative solutions

Participatory processes can lead to development of more creative and innovative solutions to environmental problems through the inclusion of a range of different perspectives (Brody, 2003; Coenen, 2008; Fritsch and Newig, 2012; Layzer, 2008) and the integration of different types of knowledge (Fung, 2006) in decision making. Open dialog and sufficient time provide for genuine exchange and reflection on the part of participants and are thereby also conducive to the emergence of creative, positive-sum solutions (Heinelt, 2002). Innovation can of course have both positive and negative implications for the environmental standard of a decision – depending on the nature of any compromise between environmental benefits and other dimensions of community wellbeing, which is likely to be shaped by the particular interests and priorities of participants and stakeholders. In this sense, whether or not innovative solutions are environmentally beneficial is dependent on causal factors described above (i.e. the influence of environmental interests and the provision of lay knowledge in a decision-making process). The development of innovative solutions is therefore not a *sufficient* causal factor for high quality decisions, but rather a supporting factor.<sup>1</sup>

##### Development of locally adjusted solutions

Participation may improve decision quality (and, eventually, implementation) through eliciting environmentally relevant 'local

<sup>1</sup> We thank one of the anonymous reviewers for having raised this last point.

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