

SOCIAL PARTICIPATION IN R&D: THE CITIZENS CONSENSUS CONFERENCES

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Summary

This chapter discusses one of the important features of a new mode of production of knowledge, which is the social participation in issues related to R&D such as definition of research agenda and evaluation of research results. It reviews some trends in social participation in complex policy issues, defending the idea that the dilemma between "elitism", on one side, and "vulgar democracy" or "tyranny of ignorance", on the other, is a false dilemma, since, several participatory mechanisms are being developed, allowing the exercise of a real democracy, where decisions on policies and priorities in R&D are made by well informed citizens, representing different sectors of society.

After reviewing some of these participatory mechanisms, a detailed description of one of them, the Consensus Conference is made. The Consensus Conference is a method of evaluation of Science and Technology issues based on interactions between experts and lay citizens. The latter are ordinary citizens who do not represent any interest group and that are responsible at the end of the Conference for the preparation of a report where they express their opinions and recommendations based on the consensus of the group.

The Consensus Conferences were conceived by the Danish Board of Technology in 1987 and its methodology was adopted as the model to follow in the various Conferences that are being organized in several countries of Europe, Asia and the United States. Aiming to promote citizen's participation in the discussion and evaluation of S&T issues in Latin America and the Caribbean, the Pan American Health Organization (PAHO) support a first experience in Chile in November, 2003 called Consensus Citizens Conference, in order to emphasize the importance of both the concept of consensus and of citizen's participation. The success of the initiative shows that participatory mechanisms in complex issues can be promoted in developing countries.

1. Introduction

This chapter presents the conceptual bases and a brief description of a methodology of citizen's participation in the discussion of Science and Technology issues called Consensus Conference, original denomination used by the Danish Board of Technology. This same methodology is called Citizens Conference in the experiences carried out in France (<http://www.inserm.fr/servcom/servcom.nsf/0/14816b04f298c447c12566a6002a4c94?OpenDocument>) and in Canada (<http://www.acs.ualgary.ca/~pubconf/report.html>). Aiming to emphasize both the concept of consensus, essential basis of this methodology, and that of citizen's participation, we propose the denomination of Citizens Consensus Conference (CCC). This denomination also has the advantage of avoiding any confusion with the Consensus Conferences held in the United States of America by the National Institutes of Health (NIH) that seek the expert consensus for given medical practices.

First of all it will be discussed the problems of citizen's participation in the discussion of complex subjects such as those of Science and Technology, pointing out that some recent trends in scientific activity create a favorable environment for such participation. In continuation some participatory methodologies particularly those that are geared for the evaluation of technologies will be presented. Finally the different methodological aspects of the Citizens Consensus Conferences are described in some detail.

2. Citizen's Participation in Subjects of Science and Technology

In countries with a strong democratic tradition, such as the United States of America, there is a growing concern over the reduction of the participation of the ordinary citizens in the debates and in the decision-making processes on complex subjects. There is a trend to consider that only the specialists can deal with these subjects, which is a clear limitation to the diversity of opinions. For Lasch the exclusion of the ordinary citizen of the public debate and the growing scarcity of public spaces where the citizens can be found as equals is an important threat to the essence and the vitality of democracy that should nourish itself on a vigorous exchange of ideas.

The absence of community spaces where the citizens can express themselves with relative equity provokes the deterioration of social capital, understood as the set of elements of social organization, such as civic participation, standards of reciprocity and confidence that facilitate cooperation for mutual profit. In contrast with private goods such as physical or human assets, social capital is a public good, created by the social relations. Putnan, who disseminated the concept of social capital, illustrates very well in his book "Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community" how the deterioration of social capital is being accentuated in the last thirty years and how this deterioration appears in minimum details of daily life. Several works are also demonstrating that the waste of the social capital results in a deterioration in living conditions and health, since the reduction of ties of solidarity and of social unity leads to a lesser political participation and consequently to a lack of care of the government to invest in human capital and networks of social support .

The divorce between the expertise and the practical experience, with a disdain of the

knowledge earned with the experience, is due, according to Morin, to the growing complexity of the problems and to the reductionist and fragmented way to face them. The super-specialization and the fragmentation of the knowledge create an ever-growing gap among "those who know" and "those who don't know", i.e. among the specialists and the citizens as a whole. According to this author, it is necessary to recognize that the simplification of the complex phenomena, through the reductionism and the mathematical analytical models are very powerful instruments of the modern science. However, they have also generated the drawbacks of the super-specialization and fragmentation of the knowledge responsible for a neo-obscurantism in which the specialist is ignorant of everything that does not concern its discipline and the non-specialist resign prematurely all possibility of thinking about the world, life, the society, leaving this to the scientists that do not have time nor the conceptual means to deal with that.

For Wilson the great challenge face today by all branches of science is to surpass this fragmentation of the knowledge that does not reflect the real world, and to promote the reassemble of the parts of the complex systems. In fact, the search for solutions to the problems that threaten sustainable development, such as violence, inequity, poverty, deterioration of the environment and so many others, oblige to surpass this fragmentation. For Morin it would be necessary to introduce the humanist culture into the scientific culture and the scientific culture into the humanistic culture in order to establish a dialogue that modifies both. For him, culture is the reunion of what is separated, is the communication between what is scattered in hermetic compartments. This integration of what is now disintegrated would make it possible to place the information and the knowledge in a context that gives sense to them within the global reality of which they are part.

For Levy, with the aid of the new technologies of information and communication, it is possible to create what he calls "knowledge space" where everybody can participate, not by profession or social status, but because everybody have some kind of knowledge originated by his/her experiences. This concept represents a new humanism based on the principle that no one knows everything and that everybody knows something. This has profound implications for the construction of true democracy, since it promotes collective effort for analysis of problems, decision-making, and evaluation of policies and interventions. This new democratic space allows a more qualitative participation where everybody can raise issues and formulate proposals for the solution of common problems.

In the Introduction of this chapter, it was mentioned that the idea that only specialists should define agendas, policies, and priorities of research, as it was proposed by Vannevar Bush in his report "Science, the endless frontier", has still an important influence in the definition of scientific policies worldwide.

However, it is important to point out that the alternative to the academic "elitism" proposed by Bush should not be "vulgar democracy" where the decisions on policies and priorities or the selection of research projects would be taken by voting of the majority. According to Kitcher in that way there would be the risk of falling into a "tyranny of the ignorance", where popular preferences, guided by impetus or ignorance,

will disregard projects or lines of research of high importance from the scientific standpoint in favor of a short-term perception, which would not increase the contribution of science to well-being.

The dilemma between the “elitism”, on one side, and “vulgar democracy” or “tyranny of ignorance”, on the other, is in fact a false dilemma, since several participatory mechanisms are being developed, allowing the exercise of a real democracy, where decisions on policies and priorities are made by well informed citizens, representing different sectors of society.

The modalities and methodologies for citizen participation in R&D subjects that are described below, particularly the Citizens Consensus Conferences should be understood as spaces and opportunities for interaction among different actors to promote the democratization of knowledge.

In this context, the democratization of knowledge is not simply the dissemination of knowledge to increase scientific literacy of the lay public, as sometimes it is misinterpreted. The democratization of knowledge is here understood as an effective participation of different sectors of society in the decision-making process related to the various aspects of management, production and utilization of scientific knowledge.

This approach could be taken as too idealistic to be applied in developing countries, where the degree of maturity of the democratic processes, the development of civic society, the consciousness of rights and citizen participation are different from Europe or the United States. However, in developing countries there exists a great quantity and diversity of experiences of citizen participation in social movements with great mobilization and organizational capacity. The absence of a committed State in guaranteeing social rights is actually an additional argument on the need for multiplying the opportunities of citizen participation.

The strengthening of participatory processes in the definition of public policies of R&D in developing countries could help to incorporate new elements for the definition of research agendas, to cultivate a scientific culture in public opinion and to restrict the time between the availability of the knowledge and its application to concrete problems that affect the population.

A review of the modalities and methodologies of citizen participation in issues related to R&D is presented in following.

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Biographical Sketch

Dr. Alberto Pellegrini Filho graduated as Medicine Doctor in 1968 from the School of Medicine of the University of São Paulo, Brazil. In 1976 he received his title of Doctor in Sciences (PhD. equivalent) from the University of Campinas (UNICAMP), Brazil. Dr. Pellegrini was Coordinator of the Research Promotion and Development Unit, Pan American Health Organization (PAHO), Regional Office of World Health Organization (WHO), in Washington, USA, from 1989 to 2004. Currently he is Senior Researcher of Oswaldo Cruz Foundation (FIOCRUZ), Rio de Janeiro, Brazil and Technical Secretary of the National Commission on Social Determinants of Health, Brazil. His working experience includes, as Professor, courses and lectures in Brazil and other Latin-American countries in the areas of Neurology, Research Methodology and Administration and Planning of Science and Technology. He is responsible for the publication of scientific articles, book chapters and books in the areas of Neurology, Neuropharmacology, Public Health, Science and Technology Policies and Knowledge and Information Management. As Technical Advisor, Dr.

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