

THE ROLE OF PARTICIPATORY TECHNOLOGY ASSESSMENT IN POLICY-MAKING

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Abstract

This paper starts with a short overview on an international comparative project on participatory forms of carrying out technology assessment (pTA) across Europe. It then summarises the project part focussing on a comparative analysis of the political roles of pTA. The last section concludes on the political potential of participatory methods.

Introduction

In its essence, Technology Assessment (TA) has a strong political dimension. When the American Congress developed TA in the 70's, it imagined a political instrument which would give to its members access to independent, objective and competent information on scientific and technological issues. Congressmen would thus be in a better position to appreciate legislative projects and able to base their political action on more viable alternatives. The concept of TA evolved further over the years, in particular in Europe. First, the addressees of TA studies were not always the legislators but increasingly also the bureaucracy and other levels of government. Second, while the American model was based on a rather scientific approach of the assessment (involving stakeholders only afterwards), European TA always struggled with how exactly to integrate interests and values in the assessment. One strand of European TA – mainly originating in Denmark – is trying to solve the problem of how to make values and interests fruitful by organising participatory procedures. With this “participatory turn”, the political dimension of TA is even reinforced as it is no more an academic activity whose outcomes are to be communicated to and used by policy-makers, but a political activity itself. Integrating various actors is eminently political, as questions of power, influence and responsibility intervene.

The politicisation of TA activities by integrating participatory elements has its origins in the recognition that the State is under pressure. New developments in science and technology put public authorities under stress as they are faced with uncertainty about the consequences of these developments and with a plurality of values and interests about them. In this sense, the development of pTA arrangements is a kind of response to the legitimacy crisis of the State. Also our other theoretical lens, inequality, highlights the possible political contribution of pTA, in particular to take into account the plurality of views and values present in society and to give them a voice.

* This paper largely draws on a paper written by Danielle Bütschi and myself as part of the EUROpTA project, first presented and discussed in The Hague on 4-5 October 99 at the 2nd International EUROpTA workshop; the paper became part of the final report to the European Commission in January 2000. An extended version will be published in June 2000 in a book published by Univ. of Westminster Press, edited by Simon Joss and Sergio Bellucci.

The EUROpTA project

The EUROpTA project was a common enterprise by six groups of TA researchers and practitioners across Europe: the Danish Board of Technology, the Dutch Rathenau Institute, the German Bureau for Technology Assessment, the TA-Programme of the Swiss Science Council, the University of Westminster, and the Austrian Institute of Technology Assessment. The group carried out a systematic survey of participatory forms of TA, based on a common theoretical and analytical framework. We produced 16 case studies and compared them in-depth with a view to five aspects: the introduction of pTA in new situations; the functional interrelationship between the objective of a participatory arrangement, the issue treated in the arrangement and the method chosen; the management of participatory arrangements; the effects of pTA on public debate and science and technology policy- and decision-making; and finally, the political role played by participatory arrangements.*

Political roles of pTA arrangements

The question we want to raise in this paper is: How do pTA arrangements perform in the policy process? What exactly is their answer to the legitimacy crisis of modern States? Aiming at integrating the analysis of scientific and technological developments into the societal debate, participatory processes face an ambitious task while their role within the policy-making process is rather complex. First of all, as a new instrument, pTA arrangements still have to prove to be worth the effort. Even then, the place they might find is far from obvious: participatory TA comes in addition to already highly complex political procedures and institutions which are, moreover, different from country to country. Therefore, pTA has to construct its role in each political system. This becomes evident from the cases studied in the EUROpTA project. Most initiators wanted the pTA arrangements to influence the process of policy-making in some way, but with different goals and perspectives. However, the chances of a pTA arrangement to have any political influence not only depend on the aims of the initiators, but as well on the type of arrangement, the societal and the institutional context.

In the paper which is the basis for this contribution, we looked at our case studies from a comparative perspective. We analysed both the types of roles in the process of policy-making which can be assigned to a pTA arrangement and which factors influenced whether or not the pTA succeeds in having any political function. We proceeded in three steps: first, we established an inventory of political roles to be possibly played by pTA arrangements (Table 1). Note that, in particular as regards items (2) to (6), the list reflects in which stage of the policy development the issue at stake is placed: starting with putting the issue on the agenda, two phases during the policy definition phase are covered (exploring objectives and filtering policy alternatives); other possible stages where pTA may intend to play a role are cases in which policy-making is blocked or in the implementation and/or evaluation phase.

* Please refer to the EUROpTA project homepage for up-to-date information and full texts of papers, case studies etc.: <http://www.tekno.dk/europta/>.

Table 1: Possible political roles of participatory TA arrangements

<i>Possible political roles</i>	<i>Description</i>
(1) Indirect political roles	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. <i>promoting communication bw. science and the public</i> public understanding of science b. <i>stimulating public debate</i> allowing an open dialogue between experts and non-experts and spreading information c. <i>awareness building</i> attaining political or societal goals indirectly via raising awareness among those concerned with implementation d. <i>raising sensitivity for method</i> changing perceptions about the forms of political discourse
(2) <i>Agenda-setter</i>	identifying all aspects of an issue and putting them on the political agenda
(3) <i>Exploration of objectives</i>	clarifying the different preferences and values as well as developing proposals for normative judgements
(4) <i>Filter of policy alternatives</i>	offering advice on the alternative to choose
(5) <i>“Blockade-runner”</i>	contributing to the management of a political conflict or stalemate
(6) <i>Implementation and evaluation of policies</i>	testing whether the ideas of the public are in line with the ideas of the politicians; evaluating a policy after implementation

Second, we looked at the practice and tried to assess the political performance of the arrangements. We observed that all our case studies came to the conclusion that the arrangements actually played in some sense a political role. Even arrangements without specific political aims have led to some discussion in the political arena. Note however, that the political performance, i.e. the attainment of the envisaged political roles, of a majority was rather weak. Note as well that it is particularly difficult to assess the impact and hence the performance of an arrangement since, first, we only seldom have in-depth impact studies and, second, it is often impossible to distinguish between effects triggered by the arrangement or by other concurrent events.

In a next step we discussed the intervening factors influencing the actual political role as well as the relationship between these “success factors” and the political aims of the pTA arrangements. This led to the following list (Table 2):

Table 2: Success factors influencing the political role of pTA arrangements

Societal context	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Good timing with public controversy</i> • <i>Good timing with de facto policy-making</i> • <i>Political relevance of the topic</i> • <i>Political culture open for (informal) participation</i>
Institutional context	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Link to the political sphere</i> • <i>Credibility and reputation of the institution</i>
Properties of the arrangement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Precise definition of the political goals</i> • <i>Fairness of the process as perceived by the political observers</i> • <i>Product of the arrangement aiming at practical implementation</i> • <i>Involvement of political actors in the process</i>

Conclusions

Often, the debate about pTA attributes to participation the role of helping decision-makers to take a decision. The analysis of the case studies of the EUOpTA project showed that the political role of pTA is far more complex and is related to the whole policy-making process. Moreover, whereas most pTA arrangements seek a direct political role, some try to intervene in the policy-making process in a more subtle manner, for instance by stimulating the public debate on the issue or by raising sensitivity for public participation. But while the discussion of the case studies showed that pTA has an inherent political dimension which can be recognised in the goals set by the organisers, their actual political role remains often short of the expectations.

Many intervening factors influence the political performance of a pTA arrangement. It seems that the “political success” of a pTA arrangement not only depends on one or two favourable factors but is the result of a particular combination of factors. This can be said, for instance, of all the consensus-conference-like arrangement outside Denmark: although the procedures are well tested in the Danish context and proved to be working well, various circumstances and factors led to rather poor results (in political terms) in other countries so far. Nevertheless, in the basic paper, we could show that some factors must be necessarily met for every pTA arrangement to be successful regardless of what the particular aim is: *credibility of the institution* and *quality of the process*. Other factors are also important, but they will be more or less crucial depending on the political role an arrangement is aiming at.

From these findings, we can make two general recommendations with respect to the political dimension of pTA. First, when practitioners envisage the possibility of setting up a pTA arrangement they must be conscious that, in some way or another, they will act within the given policy system. This can be intended or unintended and the intervention can be strong or minor. As a consequence – and independent from considerations related to the institutional setting and the properties of the arrangement – it is important, before starting any pTA, to carefully consider the actual political situation, so as to gain insights on the timing and the political relevance of the issue. The aims of the pTA arrangement should then be *adjusted to this political situation*. This will make it much easier to gain influence on the policy-making process. Moreover, as gaining influence is a matter of communication, it will be much easier for the implementers to communicate the results of the arrangement.

The second general recommendation mostly concerns the addressees of pTA arrangement, that is the politicians. Often, pTA is considered as an instrument to give advise to politicians on which decision is the right one to take. In this chapter, we were able to show that the influence of pTA on the policy-making process is of a much more subtle nature, as it can, for example, contribute to put an issue on the agenda, sketch the direction a specific policy should follow or overcome blockades. Moreover, it is commonly expected that pTA should create something new or rescue politicians from a “non-decision” situation. But we clearly saw that in many cases, pTA is rather a *catalyst*. Minority proposals are presented as viable solutions and get a chance to be accepted by the majority, too. In still other cases, pTA can bring new ideas which will develop in time and generate further new ideas. In this respect, the role of pTA on the policy-making process is of a very special nature. Finally, when assessing the role of pTA on the policy-making process, we must not forget that the actors intended to take up the results of the pTA do not always agree with its outcomes. pTA is always part of the political game in which power is at stake.