

Ten Lessons for Deliberative Practice and Scientific Governance

At the risk of over-simplifying a large body of evidence, it is worthwhile to summarise some of our findings in the form of relatively specific policy recommendations. The number of these is somewhat arbitrary and the relationship to STAGE-based evidence is admittedly variable. However, we offer the following as a contribution to policy discussion around these issues.

1. ***Don't promise what you can't (or won't) deliver. Do be clear in advance about the institutional response to and uptake of any exercise.*** Policy institutions embarking on a deliberative exercise should be as explicit as possible in advance about the status of the exercise and its recommendations. Failure to do this can lead to public disillusionment and scepticism (one of the most common questions asked by members of the public when participating in such exercises is 'will this make any difference?'). This also suggests that institutions should think carefully before embarking on any exercise about what they are trying to achieve (clarifying issues or achieving political closure?);
2. ***Don't assume that consensus is a practical (or desirable) policy objective.*** There would appear to be a common rhetorical move across Europe from 'engagement' to 'consensus formation' (and the concept of 'consensus conference' has been very influential here). We see no reason for consensus being more appropriate to policy than the identification of significant areas of disagreement and dissent. It may also be that the search for consensus within contested public issues is doomed to failure (and risks being seen as artificial);
3. ***Don't treat deliberation as a one-off hurdle.*** There is a tendency for governments in particular to view 'public participation' as an obstacle to be negotiated and then left behind as 'normal' bureaucratic processes resume. It would be better to view 'engagement' as a regular interaction designed to ensure that policy objectives and public assessments do not deviate over time. In this way also, the wider culture of governance cannot operate in isolation from (or ignorance of) public concerns;
4. ***Don't confuse a small number of high-profile engagement initiatives with the wider culture of European scientific governance. Institutions should consider the relationship between different governance modes.*** As our presentation of the governance typology above underlines, contemporary scientific governance in Europe can best be characterised as multi-modal with the deliberative mode simply one among many (and certainly not the dominant mode). This also suggests that any particular governance mode must co-exist with (often several) others – the 'market' mode is especially significant. Inevitably, this means that compromises and balances must be made. Currently, these seem to be implicit and indeed unconscious rather than explicit and reasoned;
5. ***The form – and framing – of engagement initiatives is crucial to the outcome.*** As a number of our cases demonstrate, the question is not simply *whether* public discussion occurs but crucially also *in what form* that takes place. The current tendency is for government to impose a framework on deliberation which suits its own short term policy needs rather than engaging with public problem definitions and concerns (as

when ‘technical’ issues are artificially separated from ‘ethical’ problems or questions of ‘need’ or policy alternative are defined out of discussion). Our recommendation is that considerably greater attention should be given to the ‘pre-stage’ of any deliberation – with public inputs especially valuable at that point;

6. ***There is still a tendency to polarise ‘science’ and ‘the public’.*** Despite substantial criticism of the ‘deficit’ model of science-public relations, there remains a strong tendency for official bodies to present the public as both homogeneous and remote from scientific matters. Over-generalised talk of ‘science and society’ tends to reinforce this unhelpful schism. There is an urgent need to embrace more pluralistic and overlapping models of science-public relations by, for example, acknowledging the diversity of European publics and the considerable differences in scientific evidence across multiple contexts of policy formation;
7. Linked to the previous point, ***there remain substantial and unresolved tensions around the relationship between ‘public engagement’ and ‘sound science’.*** As we have stressed at a number of points in our report, further policy attention needs to be given to the inter-relationship between contrasting governance modes and also to the wider relationship between public policy making and scientific advice. There is considerable lack of clarity right now about how scientific advice should feed into deliberative debates. The tendency is to keep science remote from engagement but this in turn places substantial constraints upon public discussions and arguably diminishes the effectiveness of science and technology policy making;
8. ***Transparency and engagement are not enough.*** Whilst for many policy makers deliberation is seen as an end in itself, for many members of the public it is primarily a means to wider institutional and policy change. So far the implications of deliberative governance for the operation of scientific institutions have been barely considered. The assumption that deliberation is simply an add-on to current policy processes may come under increasing challenge in the future;
9. ***It is important to consider what lies behind public concerns over these issues.*** In particular, there is a political tendency to reduce diverse public concerns over the form and direction of proposed innovations to a ‘risk’ framework. It is then relatively straightforward to present such concerns as uninformed and mistaken by comparison with a technical risk assessment. Such an approach is ultimately provocative rather than helpful and will cause further problems of public alienation from policy processes. Once again, the importance of planning the ‘pre-debate’ stage is emphasised. Equally, policy institutions will need to be more consistently attentive to public questions and issues as they arise;
10. ***Institutional learning is generally neglected.*** There is a tendency for initiatives to be completed and then immediately consigned to history as policy actors move on to the next challenge (or return to business as usual). It is essential that the experience of deliberative initiatives is brought together on a regular basis in order that lessons can be learnt from common experience. Given the richness of European experience in this area, there is considerable potential here for further reflection and policy development.