PUBLIC EMPOWERMENT AND ACTIONS IN AN ENVIRONMENTAL MULTISTAKEHOLDER COLLABORATIVE PROCESS[1]

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Multistakeholder Collaborative Processes (MCPs) are frequently used to facilitate interactions between governmental bodies, non-governmental organizations, industries and citizens. Their current popularity is fuelled by the hope that they may empower civil society. In this study, we examine a MCP on water management. Our analysis shows how in this MCP consensus was reached on general concepts and formed the basis of subsequent decentralized decisions and actions.

INTRODUCTION, ENVIRONMENTAL MANAGEMENT AND MCP(S)

While public participation around natural resource management is now becoming a standard practice for many institutions and researchers, forms of participation are still highly variable and their outcomes remain dubious. This paper seeks to provide insight into this issue through an analysis of a community-based multistakeholder collaboration process (MCP). The Ville-Marie Intervention Zone Committee (ZIP) is one of the fourteen MCP established in Quebec in order to echo citizens' concerns regarding the St. Lawrence River management.

In 1987, the ONU World Commission on Environment and Development produced “Our Common Future” (more widely referred to as the “Brundtland Report”), promoting the concept of sustainable development. In corporate and management circles, the prevailing rhetoric then made a dramatic shift from economic–environmental conflict to a discourse of reconciliation. Participation is now a central feature of this well-established paradigm (Kellert & al., 2001) and has led to the creation of more dedicated forms of civic involvement. The concept of sustainable development is predicated on an interdependency between economic prosperity, environmental viability, larger ecosystems, national interests, generations, bio-diversity, and a wide spectrum of stakeholders. Whereas environmental issues represent complex “metaproblems” (Trist, 1983), multistakeholder collaborative processes (MCPs), based on a democratic consensus-building approach, have been lauded as a promising strategy for managing relations between actors and, also, for enhancing civic participation. But, though MCPs have grown in popularity, very few studies have been conducted to measure their effectiveness in terms of citizens empowerment.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Lauber & Knuth (2000) caution, “the specific role that citizens should play in management decision-making is a complex question with no obvious answer” (p. 2). Their research group studies have revealed a significant divergence between the perception of participation processes (which was positive, for the most part) and the perception of their

outcomes (which was more moderate). However, environmental management espouses today a "pluralist" and "decentralized" approach in which citizens are ostensibly more empowered than before. Yet, according to observations from Kathlene & Martin (1991), Martin & Lemon (2001) and Kellert & al. (2001), the delegated power from the state to citizens has not been totally achieved and decisions are still very much the purview of political authorities. Many scholars have concluded that while citizens may have the opportunity to share their thoughts, voice their ideas (through consultation) and learn about issues (through awareness-raising initiatives), they are often excluded from decisional stages. As Kinosky & Beierle (2001) have noted, citizens tend to only play a "reactive" role. This phenomenon has often been attributed to the fact that sustainable development involves deliberations about highly technical issues. Despite these ambiguities and limits, the notion of participation has become the new modus operandi for many institutions as a matter of course in order to establish their credibility. This brings us to our first research question: Do citizens who participate in a MCP actually gain better access to decision-making processes? Gray (1989) has described MCPs as a way of coordinating stakeholder resources and interests to find solutions to problems that cannot otherwise be solved through individual efforts. In those processes, participation may appear in peculiar and various forms. However, the literature on MCPs has tended to emphasize processes of collaboration, which are consensus based and recorded participants' expectations and perceptions instead of giving a detailed account of their outcomes. Therefore, we are compelled to ask what kind of consensus is being reached using MCPs. A few case studies addressed this question (Tucotte, 1997; Turcotte & Pasquero, 2001; Turcotte & Dancause, 2002) and demonstrated that consensus was reached on general themes and that the specific options engendered controversies. The MCPs were however, conducive to learning and that represented a significant basis for future problem solving. Nevertheless, a cautionary note was sounded regarding their capability to replace traditional regulation methods. There is no doubt that MCPs represent an innovative way to engage citizens, but previous studies have not explored how effective "educated citizens" are in managing decisions and actions. This issue brings us to our second research question: Can an MCP result in community-based consensus on actions?

METHODOLOGY

To answer our two research questions, we retraced the history of deliberations within the Ville-Marie ZIP Committee during their action-planning stages in 1999. We analyzed the Committee's process and results through various publications and open-ended interviews conducted with a sample of current and former participants in the following proportions: industry and commercial reps (4); municipalities and regulatory authorities — public sector (4); environmental and community organizations — NGOs; (4) citizens (3); and the coordinator. Five units of analysis, corresponding to issues debated, were constructed through an inductive analysis. An embedded case study was written on that basis. Characteristics of participation were observed for each issue and presented in relation to the various stages of the collaboration.

THE ZIP COMMITTEE CASE

Since the inauguration of ZIP program, "The St. Lawrence River has been the theatre of a new social experiment."[2] Its goal is to involve the population as a partner in restoring this ecosystem in an extensive, broad-based program that was initially called the St. Lawrence Action Plan (SLAP). The SLAP program has been changed and amended numerous times since its beginnings in 1988 and is still pursuing its mandate. Phase I (1988–1993) was designed to address the scientific opinions of experts who had identified some 23 areas of prime concern along the St. Lawrence. The main success was the elimination of 74% of toxic effluent dumped

into the river from manufacturers. Phase II (1993–1998), renamed St. Lawrence Vision 2000 (SLV2000), radically expanded its goals, especially regarding public participation. A framework agreement was signed between Strategies Saint-Laurent, a non-governmental organization, and governments in 1993 for the creation of the "Community Intervention" program. This program was devoted to the creation of ZIP Committees along the River. Those are defined as permanent, flexible, community-based multisectoral processes that resolve environmental issues through a consensus oriented decision-making process between various community volunteers. Each ZIP works to create new opportunities for interaction among diverse groups and, accordingly, to empower the riverside population.

Phase III of SLV2000 began on April 1, 1998 and is devoted to the implementation of projects from Ecological Remedial Action Plans (ERAPs) submitted by the ZIP Committees. These plans represent the result of their collaborative efforts in their respective communities to build action-oriented projects. To this end, a program of financial support, called "Community Interaction" offered subsidies. The whole SLV2000 program comprises today a total of six components (or Areas of actions[3]) but, more than ever, governments are focusing on community involvement (SLV2000, 2000). As recalled by one of its representatives, they adhered to a new form of governance in which they shared equal power with other partners. Still, each component pursued its own objectives and communications between them were limited.

The Ville–Marie Committee was struck in 1996 and held its public consultation on June 6 and 7, 1997. At the event, an environmental regional assessment was presented, followed by thematic workshops in which participants formulated action priorities. The majority of respondents viewed this event as the key component in the ZIP program. It allowed direct contact between a variety of concerned stakeholders so that (in the words of one ZIP member from the industrial sector) it was the occasion to "build consensus on future developments and procedures regarding River management." What participants presented as "consensus" following this event was priorities reached using a quantitative method: participants each drew up a list of seven themes (priorities problems); these themes were then prioritized on the basis of their order of occurrence and frequency. In total, 112 themes were submitted and seven were selected from the three workshops. In most cases, as ZIP members estimated, themes were broadly defined priorities and not specific enough to lead to concrete actions. However, they did allow for a reconciliation of the various options set forth. The selected priorities also provided a useful framework for the next action-planning stage, namely the ERAP production.

Strategies Saint-Laurent (1998) stated that the ultimate goal of the ERAP is to "involve/mobilize the local population (…) in a consensus decision building process in order to plan remedial, protective and promotional projects for the St. Lawrence River and to implement them through various community channels."[4] However, what exactly ERAP stood for in the Ville-Marie ZIP Committee led to various interpretation. Perceptions of our interviewees ranged from a simple synthesis of knowledge to concrete actions plans. As a consequence, the achievement of consensus is questionable regarding interpretation of those objectives. Clearly, there was no consensus on the means of actions to reach them. In addition, we observed a lack of consensus between members about how to define the central concept of "action." For representatives of environmental groups, it was synonymous with direct interventions or with tangible efforts to address hot, topical issues. But for municipal or industrial representatives, other activities such as studies or roundtables on specific issues could legitimately be regarded as an "action" as well. To improve their collaborative efforts and to successfully draft projects, the Committee divided its structure into subgroups. These working subgroups were formed according to areas of intervention, potential partnerships, as well as participants' skills and

interests. Their goal was to find inclusive solutions to a large set of problems. According to members' retelling summaries, the main drawback in this approach was that information rarely left the confines of those subgroups, even though they had the opportunity to discuss their projects during general Committee meetings. As a consequence, participants learned more in depth (about the specific issues their subgroup was working on) than in breath (about all the issues of the territory). Learning to "collaborate" or just to "work into or with a ZIP" (e.g. in an MCP) also characterized their experience. While the majority of participants seemed to appreciate the benefits of "decentralizing" the process, some members expressed doubts that the ZIP could lead to a "formal consensus."

> We worked on contamination. Coming from a manufacturing plant, maybe we know more about it… People who were working on birds… worked together. But they didn't have the vantage point we had, working in a factory. That's why we ended up with more than one consensus. (Industry respondent)

The decentralization went further during the implementation stage and this led to an unexpected effect. Many interviewees were left with the impression that the Committee as a whole had taken little action. But in the year 2000, more than 75 projects were undertaken by all ZIPs. In addition, since 1994, they have piled up over 2050 tons of residue, and restored and cleaned 150 km's of watershed. In sum, the Ville-Marie Committee led to interventions but interviewees did not know much about them.

Finally, some members argued that the ideal of "representative participation" was an arduous proposition and highly porous in practice. The fact that the ZIP Committee was composed of volunteer members made it difficult to maintain participation from all sectors of the community, especially from industrial and municipal sectors who are competitively solicited. This opened the door for a redefinition of what may count as "satisfactory representation." For example, some interviewees even expressed the desire to restrict citizen participation and the need to mobilize more "big players" and to get some "real managers" on board (people with professional and political backgrounds) to further empower the ZIP Committee, increase its visibility and facilitate the process of implementing solutions. It seems that they found it difficult to collaborate with citizens and some also admitted their limits because they were unfamiliar with the political procedures, regulatory issues and environmental management concepts.

ANALYSIS

The MCP under study was overtly presented as community-based and gave citizens a forum to deliberate, to listen to one another in order to propose solutions to environmental problems. It also engendered actions, albeit in a decentralized and small form, within local communities. The large-scale issues of the SLV2000 were then mainly supported through those incremental victories of the ZIPs (cf. "small wins" in Weick, 1984). Thus, we might well ask "whose consensus was it?" The first restriction on citizen access appeared around the relationship between the "Community Involvement" component and the others of the SLV2000 program. Diachronically, it was created during Phase II and through Phase III it was more largely considered to be an important part of it. So, the most significant pollution reduction program (Phase I) did not include communities.

By the time more decisions and technical considerations had come into play, the remaining participants and partners of the ZIP Ville-Marie had to become expert-citizens on specific issues. The Committee however properly justified its decisions and actions on principles set down in its earlier stages where more stakeholders were present and on its public consultation

event in particular. If consensus is difficult to reach in an MCP (Turcotte 1997), the process adopted in the case of the Ville Marie ZIP Committee circumvented this typical problem by decentralizing the process during its decision-making and action-planning activities. In this spirit, the value of a general or symbolic consensus should not be underestimated, as it can inspire future actions. Initial consensus on priorities may have been defined in general or polysemic terms, but it played a valuable role in subsequent stages of the process by providing a legitimate framework for projects and actions. Some may say that ERAP documents were simply a compilation of all decentralized subgroup initiatives, but some members expressed empowerment and viewed ZIP developments positively because it represented an ongoing iterative process of community hearings, deliberations and incremental actions.

Furthermore, the success of any environmental plans depends upon the ability to contract allies. It was likely in this spirit that the ZIP members expressed their hopes that politicians and already powerful community representatives might get involved in the process. Their stated purpose was to co-opt their power and to take actions on behalf of society. That strategy seemed for the participants, to be a prerequisite for the empowerment of citizens.

In addition, while participation is now a central component of sustainable development, our case study revealed some motivation problems because people had their sights set on actions. Landre & Knuth (1993) recommended to circumscribe the idea of action and to present the limits of the process. Notwithstanding their agendas, the possibility of obtaining consensus on specific issues still appears somewhat doubtful given the broad spectrum of society that must be represented in a MCP. Turcotte (1997) posits that the solution may lie in preserving a degree of ambiguity and openness in stated objectives in order to embrace the interests of all stakeholders, gain consensus (albeit symbolic), and thereby maintain enthusiasm among participants.

CONCLUSION

Despite the best intentions of ZIP participants and partners, the nature of this MCP itself introduced a daunting but instructive incongruity: consensus could be reached on general priorities but specific projects and actions required that the multistakeholder structure be decentralized into subgroups in order to reach "consensus." Therefore, it appears that diversity (of interests and perspectives) and action planning were at odds in this MCP. This paradox needs to be examined in greater detail, using other empirically based analyses and further case studies. With our ZIP Committee case, our research had the advantage of perspective that comes with a longer time line and the institutionalization of the process. Proposed concepts (and consensus) could be monitored from one stage to the next, as they took form. By watching how this kind community-based MPC unfolded and analyzing its legacy, we were able to gain insights regarding how to structure them in order to empower citizens. Our findings suggest that, along with an accurate examination of MCPs, the diffused influence of democratic participation requires further exploration.

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[2] Our translation. Title of an article about the program published in *Découvrir*, 22(2), 2001.

[3] Agriculture, Biodiversity, Community Involvement, Industrial and Urban, Navigation and Human Health.

[4] Our translation. Strategies Saint-Laurent Website, http://www.strategiessl.qc.ca, december 1998