

## coping with expectations in participation processes

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## Coping with expectations in participation processes

### Clarifying expectations and avoiding disappointments

Organizing or taking part in a participation process means getting involved in a different way of reaching decisions. Participation is a chance to live democracy in one's own surroundings, but it also makes demands on all those taking part. Frequently expectations that turn out to be unrealistic lead to disappointment and misunderstandings.

This worksheet is meant to help minimize the risk of frustration in participation processes. Such processes need thorough preparation, in order to sort out goals, target groups, content, structure and organization of the process properly<sup>1</sup>. Provided that this information is presented clearly at the start of the process, that binding rules are agreed with those taking part, and that their expectations **are discussed** (“**expectation management**”), many unrealistic expectations can be dispelled in advance and misunderstandings be avoided. The fact is that frustrated expectations can lead to a loss of confidence in the participation process; and once that happens, it is very difficult to re-establish such confidence.

The worksheet is aimed both at those commissioning, preparing and running participation processes and at representatives of groups of stakeholders and ordinary citizens. It describes expectations that may exist among the various different groups of participants, and ways of handling these. The worksheet is intended to encourage one to think over one's own and others' possible expectations, and to aid in developing a realistic picture of what possibilities a participation process opens up, as well as where its limits lie.

### What this worksheet provides

The list of expectations discussed here could be extended. Each one is first formulated in a catchy phrase; in the text that follows it is discussed, before – under “Points to ponder” – recommendations for coping with it are presented. These may be aimed at all those involved, or specific groups of participants, or at the facilitators.

Cite as: Strategic Group on Participation (2010): Worksheet No. 6 on Participation, “Coping with expectations in participation processes”, Vienna

<sup>1</sup> See also Strategic Group on Participation (2003): Worksheet No. 1 on Participation, “checklist on pre-conditions and quality criteria for participation processes in the public sphere”, Vienna

## The following expectations are discussed in this worksheet:

“A participation process is for implementing my/our ideas 1:1!”	4
“I represent my own interests, public welfare doesn’t matter that much to me.”	
“I’m not against this project as such, but it shouldn’t be implemented in my neighbourhood.”	
“This issue ought to matter just as much to everyone else as it does to us!” (e.g. a lobbyist’s perspective)	4
“I know exactly what the others think and what they’re going to say.”	5
“In any case there’s no scope for alternatives, so what’s the point of discussing it all?”	5
“I don’t just want to talk about details (e.g. the cycle track), but to help develop a comprehensive solution (e.g. an overall traffic plan for the community).”	6
“I’ve expressed my concerns, now it’s up to the politicians to find a solution – after all, what did I elect them for?”	6
“At the end of a participation process everyone is always on the winning side.”	
“Without exception, the result of participation processes is a win-win solution.”	7
“Decisions reached via participation automatically contribute to sustainable development.”	7
“The participation process is fine as a way of giving people something to do – but at the end of the day it’ll be us who actually decide!”	8
“The politicians and civil servants end up doing whatever they like, regardless!”	
“They just want to keep us busy!”	9
“I put time and energy into it all and someone else sells the result as theirs.”	10
“If people are interested in the issue, they’ll definitely join in the participation process.”	
“Only a handful has come along – obviously people aren’t interested in having a say, even in matters that affect them directly.”	10
“Our grassroots initiative represents the majority, so we can prevent the project being implemented!”	
“Here we have the last word!”	
“As I represent a club with a wide membership here, my voice carries more weight!”	11
“The longer the discussion goes on, the more likely it is that everyone is happy!”	
“A proper discussion takes time.”	
“After three meetings we must have a result that can be implemented on the spot.”	11
“The facilitators aren’t neutral – after all, they get paid by one particular organization.”	
“The facilitators will come up with the right solution for me.”	
“The facilitators are responsible for the result.”	12

Possible expectation:

**“A participation process is for implementing my/our ideas 1:1!”**

In a participation process all sorts of different people with differing interests and needs meet up. Each participant can table his or her views, ideas, interests and creative suggestions within the framework of the process. Democracy comes alive only as and when the various different interests clash and people discuss this. So enforcing one’s own interests across the board is possible only in exceptional cases. The goal of a participation process is to find a solution which the various different standpoints contribute to and that accommodates the various different needs as well as possible.

**Points to ponder:**

- > As a civil servant or facilitator you should make it clear right at the start that, with rare exceptions, a participation process cannot fulfil the expectation of enforcing one’s own ideas across the board.
- > As a participant you should be aware that, given the disparity of interests, this expectation can be fulfilled only in exceptional cases.
- > A participation process is an opportunity for dialogue. As a participant in the process you will encounter other points of view and perspectives that may have been unknown to you previously. With the new information your viewpoint (and others’) may develop further or shift.
- > It is important to reach agreement at the start of the process that everyone is willing to listen to the others’ views, and to discuss ways in which disparate views could be brought closer together<sup>2</sup>.
- > How decisions are reached also makes a difference<sup>3</sup>: If they are reached by negotiating for a consensus, it is pretty likely that the final result will incorporate your view to some extent. If decisions are reached by majority vote, you might be among the participants who were outvoted.

Possible expectations:

**“I represent my own interests, public welfare doesn’t matter that much to me.”**

**“I’m not against this project as such, but it shouldn’t be implemented in my neighbourhood.”**

**“This issue ought to matter just as much to everyone else as it does to us!”  
(e.g. a lobbyist’s perspective)**

What motivates ordinary citizens or common-interest groups to take part in a participation process varies greatly; however, it is always connected with a personal interest in an issue or in solving a problem. In cooperative processes the participants learn that for a real solution to be possible differing viewpoints need to be harmonized, whether private concerns of individual citizens

<sup>2</sup> For appropriate methods see also: [www.partizipation.at/methods.html](http://www.partizipation.at/methods.html)

<sup>3</sup> See also Strategic Group on Participation (2008): Worksheets on participation, No. 5 „reaching decisions in participation processes“, Vienna.

or public welfare – e.g. the need of peaceful surroundings to live in versus the wish for satisfactory access and a road network without gaps. The dialogue promotes understanding for other interests, and possibly convergence with the viewpoints of other individuals and groups taking part.

#### Points to ponder:

- > Going back to first principles: individuals' right to belong to a community carries with it a responsibility to contribute to preserving and renewing that same community according to their respective position and abilities. If people succeed in anchoring participation in place as an instrument of well-balanced rights and obligations within a community, conflicts between individual interests and public welfare can be defused to some extent.
- > Your job as a facilitator is to create a space in which it becomes possible to see individual or group interests in relation to other viewpoints tabled in the context of a overarching whole. In the course of the process the important thing is to increase reciprocal understanding for the legitimate interests of all the participants, thus achieving the conditions necessary for joint solutions.

Possible expectation:

**“I know exactly what the others think and what they're going to say.”**

Rigid opinions about other groups involved (politicians, civil servants, NGOs, business people, ordinary citizens) impede open communication in participation processes. They prevent one from listening attentively to how the others present their views and interests, from recognizing these as legitimate, and from joining in the search for a joint solution without reservations.

#### Points to ponder:

- > As a facilitator, establish an atmosphere of openness and trust in which all concerns can be tabled on an equal footing and polemics and disparagement have no place. Aim to get everyone taking part to listen to the others and accept their concerns as legitimate.
- > As a participant in such a process, enter into discussion with an open, curious mind. One cannot always size up all the various points of view accurately in advance.

Possible expectation:

**“In any case there's no scope for alternatives, so what's the point of discussing it all?”**

A participation process needs plenty of scope for (re)shaping things; so anyone launching such a process should check in advance what has already been decided and what options are available as regards searching for a joint solution. If it is clear at the start of the process how much scope is available for (re)shaping things, this will make it much easier for individuals to decide whether they want to take part in the process in the circumstances obtaining.

### Points to ponder:

- > As a facilitator, define in advance with those responsible what is up for discussion and what is not.
- > Explain clearly how much scope exists for (re)shaping things, so that potential participants can decide whether they want to take part, and so that no misunderstandings and unrealistic expectations arise among the actual participants.
- > If, before a participation process gets going, the target groups addressed fail to get involved, possibly because there is not enough scope for (re)shaping things, you should, in your capacity as facilitator, think over again together with the client how the offer can be made more attractive.

Possible expectation:

**“I don’t just want to talk about details (e.g. the cycle track), but I want to help develop a comprehensive solution (e.g. an overall traffic plan for the community).”**

Apart from defining the framework, the goals and the assignment, it is also important that the process boundaries be staked out clearly – for instance, what level the issue to be decided is at and which topics can be discussed, and decisions taken on them, at this level. An agreement could be reached, say, that a particular topic or a higher-level issue should be made the subject of a different participation process. The participants could then decide whether they wanted to take part in the process on that topic.

### Points to ponder:

- > Before commissioning a participation process, clarify the topic to be discussed and define/delimit it in a sensible way (if possible together with the participants).
- > As a facilitator, clarify who is authorized to decide a higher-level issue, and how you can make the need for discussion clear to the department concerned and/or pass relevant results connected with a higher-order issue to that department.
- > As a facilitator, provide enough opportunity within the participation process for addressing pent-up needs to discuss things. In cases where the topic has been delimited beforehand, explain what can/cannot meaningfully be discussed/dealt with, and why this boundary has been chosen.

Possible expectation:

**“I’ve expressed my concerns, now it’s up to the politicians to find a solution – after all, what did I elect them for?”**

In a representative democracy the task of those elected to political office is to represent the citizens’ interests and to incorporate these in political decisions even-handedly. In practice some interests are accommodated to a greater extent, other hardly or not at all. There can be all sorts of reasons for this: how visible these interests are, how influential the relevant lobby is,

how vehemently and obstinately the relevant demands are put forward, etc. Participation processes provide a forum in which one can canvass for one's concerns, find allies and convince others with arguments.

**Points to ponder:**

- > Politics always involves negotiating between differing interests; only those concerns that are actually tabled and presented in plausible terms can play a part in the negotiations. If you yourself are active on behalf of your concern, the chances that a solution will be found for it improve.
- > Participation processes require commitment and an investment in time from those taking part. At the same time, though, they provide opportunities to influence decisions that affect one's own quality of life.

Possible expectations:

**“At the end of a participation process everyone is always on the winning side.”**

**“Without exception, the result of participation processes is a win-win solution.”**

As a rule, successful participation processes deliver durable solutions which fit in with the needs of many of those taking part. But the results of participation processes do not always benefit everyone taking part. However, those forced to put up with disadvantages can, for instance, receive appropriate compensation for these, in which case they will find it easier to agree to the solution in question.

**Points to ponder:**

- > It is essential to identify the disadvantages clearly by name and not to gloss over them.
- > See to it that compensation for disadvantages is fair, i.e. that those forced to put up with disadvantages receive the best compensation possible, e.g. by means of noise abatement measures, special community services, grants etc.
- > Take care that people who fail to (or are unable to) participate are not saddled with most of the disadvantages.
- > As a facilitator, try to motivate everyone who may be affected by a solution to participate.

Possible expectation:

**“Decisions reached via participation automatically contribute to sustainable development.”**

Public participation plays an important part in sustainability strategies – after all, these are intended to achieve a balance between economic, social and environmental interests acceptable to all those involved. But this does not automatically mean that decisions prepared via participation will lead to sustainable results. In the reality of participation processes it is all but ruled out that the manifold aspects of sustainable development will be adequately re-

presented purely by the various groups taking part. Sustainable development is not just about reconciling environmental, social and economic aspirations with one another, but is also concerned with the needs of future generations – as well as pursuing a global perspective of social justice.

#### Points to ponder:

- > Encourage all participants to reach a consensus on what the concept of sustainable development implies in the context of the actual issue.
- > Invite people representing all relevant aspects of sustainable development to participate in the process.
- > Discuss conflicts between economic, environmental and social goals, and clarify whether/how these differing interests should/can be taken into account on an equal footing in the participation process.
- > Point out what effects various possible solutions would have on the relevant aspects of sustainable development, and how negative effects can be avoided.
- > If possible, bear in mind what effects the results of the participation process could have on future generations.

Possible expectation:

**“The participation process is fine as a way of giving people something to do – but at the end of the day it’ll be us who actually decide!”**

This attitude (not unknown among politicians and civil servants) has to do with the issue of what role those taking part have in the process (to what extent they can share in the decision) and who ultimately has the last word on the issue under discussion. If policymakers opt for a participation process, they must be willing to take the results of the process into account when taking their decision. “Taking into account” means that the policymakers give respectful attention to these results and incorporate them in their decision as far as possible. If their decision diverges significantly from the results reached via participation, intelligible reasons for this should be given/communicated in terms of the content of the participation process<sup>4</sup>. How smoothly novel, participative ways of reaching decisions mesh in with the traditional forms of representative democracy largely depends on how the interface between the participation process and the policymaking bodies is configured.

<sup>4</sup> See also: „Standards of Public Participation”, adopted by the Austrian Council of Ministers on 2 July 2008), [www.partizipation.at/standards\\_pp.html](http://www.partizipation.at/standards_pp.html)

### Points to ponder:

- > It must be clear from the start both to the organizations funding participation processes and to those taking part how far the results of the process are binding, who ultimately decides, and whether the participants are simply being consulted or are to share in a joint decision. If the participants come to feel that they are not being taken seriously and that the results of the process will not be taken into account in the final decision, their willingness to get involved in anything similar may be permanently impaired (see also the next point).
- > Solutions reached in participation processes can have several advantages for policymakers<sup>5</sup>: for instance, the quality of the results and/or the level of acceptance may be higher, planning may be more dependable, etc. In most cases participation processes enhance the material on which to base the decision, but leave the actual decision in the hands of the political entities officially responsible. For the policymakers that often means, that their decisions become more visible, and thus need to be explained intelligibly: the responsibility of the policymaking bodies is then more in the public eye.

Possible expectations:

**“The politicians and civil servants end up doing whatever they like, regardless!” / “They just want to keep us busy!”**

Some individuals and common-interest groups doubt whether politicians and civil servants actually take the results of participation processes into account. This attitude may be due to negative experience with processes of this kind. To counteract this attitude, which of course inhibits people from taking part in such processes, the best way of generating trust is to present credible opportunities to participate; successful case histories can serve as models here.

### Points to ponder:

- > Before initiating a participation process, one should check whether such a process is a suitable tool for the issue in question, whether the necessary resources are available and whether the policymakers are willing to take the results achieved into account (see also the previous expectation).
- > It makes sense for individuals and common-interest groups to consider beforehand whether the offer to participate is attractive enough<sup>6</sup> and whether alternatives preferable to getting involved in a participation process exist.
- > The following questions may be helpful as and when individuals and common-interest groups weigh up whether to take part in a participation process:
  - What exactly do I want to achieve in this process?
  - What are my top-priority aims? What matters less to me?
  - How good are the chances that I can achieve my aims? Who or what could be helpful? Who or what could jeopardize achieving these goals?
  - What are my maximum aims? What are my minimum aims? In which areas could I make (limited) concessions? Where do I have leeway for negotiation?
  - How else can I achieve my aims (other than by taking part in a participation process)?

<sup>5</sup> See also Strategic Group on Participation (2004): Worksheets on participation, No. 2 „benefits of participation processes from the point of view of the various groups of agents“, Vienna

<sup>6</sup> See also Strategic Group on Participation (2003): Worksheets on participation, No. 1 „checklists on preconditions and quality criteria for participation processes in the public sphere“, Vienna as well as „Standards of public participation – Recommendations for Good Practice“, April 2008.

Possible expectation:

**“I put time and energy into it all and someone else sells the result as theirs.”**

In a participation process a large number of people contribute to the result achieved. If these contributions are left unmentioned at the end of the day, and only a few people, for instance politicians and civil servants, are publicly associated with the result achieved, this may annoy many of those involved.

**Points to ponder:**

- > Participation stands and falls with appreciation and recognition. Politicians and civil servants should publicly recognize and acknowledge the commitment of people who volunteer to take part in participation processes in their spare time: this may involve naming them in public, awarding prizes or privileges, financial compensation, etc.
- > Communication in and around a participation process is a tricky business; arrangements for this should be made at the start of the process.. Who communicates details of the process and its results to the outside world, and in what form? It is also a good idea to agree with the policymakers (if possible in writing) how the results of the process are to be handled.

Possible expectations:

**“If people are interested in the issue, they’ll definitely join in the participation process.”**

**“Only a handful people have come along – obviously they are not interested in having a say, even in matters that affect them directly.”**

Reluctance to participate may simply be due to lack of interest. In many cases, though, there is something wrong with the general set-up – e.g. the dates of meetings, the scope offered for creativity, or the way the topic has been prepared beforehand. There are a number of obstacles (mainly for migrants, single parents and other disadvantaged groups) to taking an active part in public discussions. For someone to decide to join in a participation process, they need to have enough time, to obtain and understand the relevant information, to feel competent to have a say about the topic in question, etc. Previous mishaps or the feeling that ordinary citizens are completely powerless can also be reasons for not joining in a participation process.

**Points to ponder:**

- > Is the information about the process easy to understand, and has it reached as many target groups as possible?
- > Does the process timetable take the various time constraints applying to as many potential participants as possible into account?
- > Have arrangements been made so that hard-to-reach groups (see above) can take part too?
- > Is the offer of participation attractive enough? Have the participants enough scope for negotiating and sharing in decisions?
- > In large-scale participation processes the amount of time required can be an obstacle: in contrast to civil servants, ordinary citizens and some lobbyists invest their time and knowledge on an honorary basis. So it is important to acknowledge adequately the time invested free of charge and the specialized knowledge contributed, and to indicate in advance how much time is likely to be needed.

Possible expectations:

**“Our grassroots initiative represents the majority, so we can prevent the project being implemented!”**

**“Here we have the last word!”**

**“As I represent a club with a wide membership here, my voice carries more weight!”**

The question of how to weight votes frequently comes up in participation processes. Neither the rule “one person or organization – one vote” nor the rule “the more members a club has, the more weight the vote of the club’s representative carries” applies automatically. Arrangements about this need to be made at the start of the process, in line with the actual situation. Weighting votes makes more difference to the result in the case of majority voting than in the case of consensual decisions; it is not often employed in participation processes, though.<sup>7</sup>

#### Points to ponder:

- > The decisive factor as regards attaining one’s goal is not the number of people supporting a given proposal, but how convincing the arguments for or against it are – and often the legal framework, too. So it is important to prepare one’s arguments with care and to clarify what is legally possible.
- > As a facilitator, see to it that the various groups can present their interests and views on an equal footing, and that communication takes place on a level playing-field and on an equal footing.

Possible expectations:

**“The longer the discussion goes on, the more likely it is that everyone is happy!”**

**“A proper discussion takes time.”**

**“After three meetings we must have a result that can be implemented on the spot.”**

Discrepancies in people’s expectations about the timescale for the process can be resolved if information is provided about how much time is available. It is a good idea to paint a realistic picture of the time constraints applying to working out a result, and of the political and administrative steps between the end of the process and actual implementation. Sufficient time for discussion makes it easier to understand others’ interests, facilitates convergence between differing points of view, and makes it more likely that a solution with wide support will be found. However, a longer discussion does not always improve the quality of the result. In some cases it makes sense – even if the ideal solution has not been found and agreement seems far off – to terminate

<sup>7</sup> See also Strategic Group on Participation (2008): Worksheets on participation, No. 5 „reaching decisions in participation processes“, Vienna

a long-drawn-out discussion and bring about a decision. If necessary, the decision can be reviewed and modified at a later date; this can even be agreed during the process itself.

#### Points to ponder:

- > As a facilitator, peg out the framework for the participation process (e.g. time available, budget provided, etc.) and make it clear to all participants what they are getting into and within what framework decisions can/must be reached. Allow some extra time as a precaution.
- > Divide the process into separate phases and steps, and make it clear to the participants which decisions must be taken by a given date and which can be taken later. That makes it easier to understand the process, and gives the participants more confidence in the procedure adopted.
- > Give some thought to the question of exactly how decisions are to be reached<sup>8</sup>. If you need to make the current situation clear after a period of discussion, you can ask everyone how they feel, or carry out a straw poll.
- > At the start of the discussion settle whether decisions are reached by majority vote, or the decision is delegated to others if a decision based on consensus is not reached within the time envisaged.
- > Make it clear what the consequences will be if no agreement is reached – for instance, that the policymakers may take the result of the process less seriously.
- > If the various interests clash head-on, one possibility is to aim for a consensual solution in the essential points and to list the remaining points (on which no agreement can be reached) in a special document, with the option of coming back to these and going on working on them at a later date. A document of this kind often makes things much easier for the participants, and can open the way to a consensus in other areas.

Possible expectations:

**“The facilitators aren’t neutral – after all, they get paid by one particular organization.”**

**“The facilitators will come up with the right solution for me.”**

**“The facilitators are responsible for the result.”**

Facilitators are responsible for the process, but not for the content of the results. Their task is to assure the quality of how the process is prepared and carried out. They are not responsible for the solution in terms of content – that is what the actual participants generate. Expectations about the facilitators’ role should be sorted out with the client when their remit is specified, and with the participants at the start of the process.

#### Points to ponder:

- > What exactly is the facilitators’ remit? Does it allow them to mediate and to act neutrally?
- > Who selects the facilitators? Are the common-interest groups taking part involved in the selection?
- > Who commissions and pays the facilitators? Is the funding shared out so that the participants contribute?
- > Has the facilitators’ role been made clear to the participants at the start of the process? Has it been made clear that the participants, not the facilitators, are responsible for the result and/or solution?

<sup>8</sup> See also Strategic Group on Participation (2008): Worksheets on participation, No. 5 „reaching decisions in participation processes“, Vienna

## STRATEGIC GROUP ON PARTICIPATION

In 2002, on the initiative of the Ministry of the Environment, ÖGUT set up the Strategic Group on Participation, which is intended to

- > give the notion of „Participation“ clearer contours, develop it further and make it more widely known,
- > promote awareness of participation in the public eye and among decision-makers in politics, the administration and business,
- > work out participation strategies for policies relevant to the environment and sustainability,
- > contribute to sustainable development by promoting participation,
- > promote participation at communal, regional and national level,
- > make concrete “how to” guides available to people with practical interests.

The members of the Strategic Group on Participation are qualified experts on the subject with backgrounds in many different fields. The following experts were members of the group when this worksheet was drafted. For the status quo of membership please visit <http://www.partizipation.at/members.html>:

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## THE WORKSHEETS AS PRODUCTS OF THE STRATEGIC GROUP

The results of debate within the Strategic Group are summarized and published as “Worksheets on Participation” and aim at facilitating practitioners’ work.

- > The Worksheet No. 1 on Participation drawn up in the Strategic Group contains a checklist on preconditions for participation processes in the public sphere and a checklist on quality criteria for participation processes in the public sphere.
- > The Worksheet No. 2 on Participation presents an array of arguments in connexion with the question of what benefits participation provides for which groups of agents.
- > The Worksheet No. 3 on Participation deals with the limits of and possible obstacles to participation processes, and with the risk of such processes being misused.
- > No. 4 of the Worksheets on participation contains recommendations for dealing with statements in formal and informal participation processes.
- > Worksheet No. 5 is concerned with ways of reaching decisions in participation processes, and is meant to simplify the task of identifying the most suitable way in a particular case.
- > Worksheet No. 6 discusses possible expectations in participation processes.

All products from the Strategic Group are available on the website [www.partizipation.at](http://www.partizipation.at).

Utilizing the worksheets is permitted and encouraged, provided that reference is made to the “authorship of the ÖGUT Strategic Group on Participation”. Responses and comments are welcome, and will be taken into account as revised versions are generated.

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