

# **Social Analysis Systems (SAS<sup>2</sup> method) to improve public participation in environmental decision-making in Portugal**

Dissertation of Master's in Environmental Engineering

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## **Abstract**

Every citizen has the right and the duty to contribute to decisions in order to make them fairer, transparent and well justified, especially when those decisions are related to the environment, since its physical, social and economic components, have an impact on all the society.

Public participation is complex because it is a process of engagement of stakeholders with different values and characteristics. There are many different types of participative methods.

The legal framework for public participation is vast.

The Aarhus convention defined the access to information and participation on environmental decision making a right to every citizen.

In Portugal the legal framework for public participation finds its source in the roots of the democratic regime, and it is primarily defined in the Portuguese Constitution, and regulated in other documents for more specific questions.

Despite the existence of legislation and good practice guidelines, the practice of public participation in Portugal is not very effective.

With the aim of improving its practice this research conducted a study on the use of a participative method – Social Analysis Systems (SAS<sup>2</sup>) – to deal with participative processes in Portugal.

This method allows the creation of critical capacity in citizens, as well as the creation of adequate conditions for their engagement in decision making, promoting social and collaborative learning during the process in order to create knowledge.

To better understand the state of public participation in Portugal a case study was selected – the participative process in Cova da Moura during the Critical Neighborhoods Initiative – where some of the engaged participants were asked to answer questions in the context of this research, with the purpose of getting a direct observation of the reality.

We conclude that people felt that the participatory process had lots of gaps and misunderstandings (that were the cause for the “mediocre” results obtained in the inquiries).

We also confirmed that some of the gaps of the case study were compatible with the gaps found in the literature about the public participation practice in Portugal, what give us a strong base to move on in a justified way to the proposal of using adequate techniques from the SAS<sup>2</sup> method in public participation in Portuguese cases in order to fulfill the gaps and improve the practice.

**Key-words:** Public participation, Stakeholder’s engagement, Decision-making, Values in decision processes, Direct observation.

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## 1. Introduction

According with Reed (2008), the complexity of the environmental problem’s and its natural dynamics, require flexibility and a process of a transparent decision-making, which gathers a huge diversity of knowledge and values.

The participation of stakeholders in environmental decision-making is a tool that allows not only having transparency but it also guarantees a fair and adequate decision, which is fitted into the context.

That’s the reason why she had been frequently incorporated in the national and international policies, in order to allow, through the dialogue and collaboration of the involved in the participative processes, a solution of the existing problems.

Public involvement is needed to get “a compromise between perspectives and opposite values, as well to try to

get a global consensus about the proposals, in order to achieve a decision that promotes the sustainable development” (André, Enserink, Connor, & Croal, 2006).

The public participation is seen also as “an instrument of consideration of public’s values, objectives and preferences in decision processes” (Partidário & Jesus, 2003), so, choosing the participative method should be a task prepared with time, never forgetting the problem’s context, who the involved stakeholders are and which are the existing options to that problem.

There are lots of participative methods, so in order to have a well-succeeded participative process it’s important to select a method that guarantees that “the local and scientific knowledge can be integrated in order to provide a more comprehensive perspective of the complex dynamics of

the socio-ecological systems and processes” (Reed, 2008).

One of the methods that corresponds to that criterion is called Social Analysis Systems (SAS<sup>2</sup>) and their authors classify it as a “creative approach that uses the knowledge to the common good acting directly on the problems” (Chevalier & Buckles, 2008).

In this method, we found gathered the essential tools to the correct development of the public participation processes, related to environmental decision-making, because it allows a detailed planning of all the problem’s context and provides, according to its characteristics, the technique or the group of techniques more suited to the success of the participative process.

In Portugal there is legislation that commands public participation in every matter. However, the existence of legislation doesn’t mean success in practice.

Most of Portuguese public participation processes are accused of not involving the public, not using good methods in the planning of the events, not using adequate language in order to help the public understand what is their goal, and not giving information about public participation sessions (e.g. number of people present or the methods used)

On the other hand, the Portuguese people are not proactive and participative people

So, in order to improve the public participation in Portugal we suggest the use of Social Analysis Systems (SAS<sup>2</sup>) method when planning the public participation events, in order to have a more adaptive, collaborative and flexible method that really involves all the people and stimulate them to give their opinions.

In order to be considered successful, a public participation method should be people-oriented so, in order to evaluate the efficiency of a specific public participation process in Portugal, we developed some questions that were answered by some of the stakeholders.

The results came out reflecting that people were not totally satisfied with the process (neither with the method used).

This means there is space to integrate the method already mentioned (SAS<sup>2</sup> method) with the purpose of improving those perceptions.

Not only in a local scale, but in a national scale, since the problems were very similar between the case study and the gaps found by specialists in literature about public participation practice in Portugal.

## **2. Methodology**

To achieve a deep comprehension of the public processes in environmental decision making used in Portugal the methodology used was

essentially the documental analysis and research.

However, it was also conducted a telephonic inquiry with the purpose of analyzing better some issues, related to a case study that was selected to provide a more tangible understanding of the practice of public participation in Portugal.

Several important documents were analyzed in order to perceive the fundamental concepts of public participation and the way they interconnect and relate with each other, as well as the legal framework where these relations occur.

In the meantime the practice of Public participation in Portugal was also explored in order to understand where we are and what we can do to improve it.

In this sequence it was also presented the fundamentals of Social Analysis Systems (SAS<sup>2</sup>), a public participation method used worldwide and with lots of success in the most mixed environments, in order to show that it may be this method the one who helps improving public participation in Portugal.

On the other hand, and with the goal of trying to get a more direct research approach, some telephonic inquiries were done to understand the perceptions of the people involved in the participative processes occurred in the selected case study – Critical

neighborhood initiative in Cova da Moura.

### **3. Background**

#### ***Main concepts and their relation***

The definition of environment, the main concept in the subject here discussed, is defined in the Portuguese environmental law (1987) as the “set of physical, chemical and biological systems and its relations and of the economic, social and cultural issues with direct or indirect impact, over the living beings and the men’s quality of life.”

Consequently, any introduction of an alteration, or any situation that induces a change in the normal state of environment will affect its ecological, economic and social dimension.

When looking more specifically into the social dimension of environment, we need to keep in mind that different values and ideas arise all the time, because people (the living part of social dimension) are different, which makes them understand those modifications in a different way.

Kurt Lewin (1935) defends that the man responds to the introduction of a modification in his habitat with a specific behavior, thus, every time he feels affected, he acts with the purpose of deleting that modification, and he usually does it by taking decisions.

In the daily life where the environment’s social dimension takes

place, there are lots of issues that influence the decision making processes, such as cognitive bias, cognitive limitations and also differences between culture and behaviors.

The pointed issues distinguish the people affected by the introduced change (or the “to be” introduced) into the environment and consequently creates conflicts during the decision making processes, since there is a lack of consensus between the parties.

Public participation is the process which allows the integration of the different concerns, perceptions and values of one single person, groups and/or organizations that are affected by and/or may affect the decision to take.

There were lots of methods and techniques used in the participatory sessions with the objective of reducing the differences between the values of the involved people, in order to find in an easier way, the common interest points, in order to reach a consensus, which will allow a fairer decision.

However, and according Reed (2008), there are few evidences that stakeholder’s involvement in environmental decision making can promote or improve the social learning, as the majority of the used methods does not allow a true involvement.

It is in the following context that the SAS<sup>2</sup> method appears as an

alternative, because it allows a mediation of the decision processes through an involvement and cooperation approach, employing several techniques, including the research method from social sciences called direct observation, which allows acting directly on the environment where the modification occurs (or will occur).

In conclusion, this method allows not only having a more integrated and collaborative decision, but also a social learning as a result of all the collaboration and cooperation of the involved stakeholders.

#### ***International context***

The two most important international documents concerning public participation are the Rio Declaration signed in 1992 and the Aarhus Convention signed in 1998.

In the first document it’s stressed out, particularly in the 10<sup>th</sup> principle, “the recognition of the right to information, public participation and access to justice when concerning environmental matters” (Partidário & Jesus, 2003).

The second document is considered the principal international legal orientation for public participation. It’s explicitly published there that: “Every citizen has the right of living in an environment suited to his health and well-being and the duty, individual or in association of protect and improve the environment in order to make it better

for the actual and future generations and to do that they should have access to information, having the right to participate in the decision-making process and having access to justice in what concerns environmental issues” (Aarhus Convention, 1998).

There are also specific legislations to specific matters when concerning public participation in environmental decision-making such as the following directives: environmental impact assessment, access to environmental information, prevention and integrated control of pollution, strategic environmental assessment and Espoo convention.

### ***Participation typologies***

After a bibliographic research, it was decided to select the “Participation ladder” by Arnstein (1969) to describe the different types of participation that can occur during a decision-making process.

Arnstein divided the different types of participation by the weight of the public’s opinion in the decision.

As said above, we have:

- *Manipulation*: some citizens are invited by decision makers to represent the population in order to have their plans approved;
- *Information*: it’s the transmission of data from decision makers to public in this unidirectional flow;

- *Consultation*: strategy of gathering comments that should be integrated in the final plans;
- *Participation*: process of compromise from the decision-makers to accept the input from public and integrate it into final plans;
- *Citizen Empowerment*: acceptance of a compromise by the public to assume part of the decision making;
- *Citizen Control*: The extreme level of control that public can have in the decisions that are expressed by the assumption of taking all the decision by them.

### ***Participation and decision-making***

Decision making is the cognitive process where someone chooses to take a specific plan/action when facing a problem, with an opportunity cost.

The whole process can be easily represented by three parts: the ones who enforce the decision (the decision-makers), the decision (the data and the knowledge that refers to the specific situation that is being discussed) and who is affected and/or can affect that decision (stakeholders).

It’s in the middle of this process that the public participation appears as the “instrument of consideration of values, objectives and public’s preferences in decision-making processes” (Partidário & Jesus, 2003).

Public participation tries to give more flexibility to the decision making process and also improve it in order to achieve a fairer, collaborative and cooperative decision, in which, during its process, all of the involved people should learn something.

The participatory processes can be effective or not effective, but we will focus on a specific method that has the foundations to make us achieve effectiveness.

### ***Public participation in Portugal***

Regarding legislation of public participation, Portugal has a very strong component remounting to its democratic roots.

Therefore, in 1976, when the Portuguese Constitution was written, it was already mentioned in it, that public participation were an important right and duty.

Nowadays, in Portugal, most of the public participation methods used are essentially passive, which in Valadas (2012) opinion is not sufficient due to a lack of real involvement.

To explain the bad public participation practice, some experts say that the dictatorial regime implemented in Portugal had affected the capacity of the Portuguese community of self-organize and to think about specific questions, leaving them with a passive attitude.

Besides that the lack of transparency when accessing to

information about environment and the use of inappropriate language (too technique) by technicians/decision makers to deal with people are also two important issues that must be solved.

Without involvement occur a loss of credibility and the interest of public participation decreases.

### ***Social Analysis Systems (SAS<sup>2</sup>)***

As an alternative to the passive participatory methods used in Portugal, it is suggested the application of a flexible participatory method by Chevalier & Buckles (2008) called Social Analysis Systems (SAS<sup>2</sup>).

This method is constituted by two groups of techniques: all-purpose techniques and social analysis systems.

These flexible techniques allow a different way of thinking about problems making sure that social learning is achieved during the participatory process.

The SAS<sup>2</sup> is so flexible that for example it was applied to tribal communities in order to find solutions for different situations, usually related to the lack of resources.

As we can see this method is a great tool, capable of achieving the objective we want for the Portuguese public participation: effectiveness.

Only upon using this type of methods, which are flexible and adjustable to a plethora of contexts, we can achieve fair and transparent

decisions, where all the involved parties learn with each other.

#### 4. Results and Discussion

To better understand public participation in Portugal a case study was selected to be studied deeper.

The selected case study was the participatory process occurred in Cova da Moura neighborhood, during the critical neighborhood's initiative.

That initiative wanted to develop a participated socio-territorial intervention, in order to achieve a sustainable neighborhood for Cova da Moura.

So, as to understand if the participatory process was successful and efficient, an inquiry was conducted to 50 involved people that were asked to classify (from 1-bad, 2-medium to 3-good) the effectiveness of both the participatory process and the method used (participative forum's).

After analyzing the inquiries it was concluded that:

- **The effectiveness of the participatory process was classified as reasonable** because the involved people found it not totally satisfactory.

This was explained by the use of inappropriate language (it was too technical) from technicians to

public, by the lack of initial involvement of the public when the process started and also because of the weak attempts to achieve alternatives more suited to Cova da Moura inhabitants.

However, even though it was not totally well succeeded, it was a first of a kind implementation of a theoretical structure, with foundations in a structure of governance, being considered a pioneer in the area.

This also shows us that Portugal can be more than passive methods and though the improvement of some issues, it could lead us to a state of true social learning.

- **The effectiveness of the participatory method (participative forums) was also classified as reasonable** because the involved people found also some non-satisfying issues.

The most pointed non-satisfying issue was the sensation of lack of representation that the inhabitants had. They didn't felt represented by the chosen associations which lead to the less positive results obtained.

To summarize the results, it's important to stress out that in terms of effectiveness of the participatory process and of the participatory method the case study revealed



positive results, even though there were some punctual negative issues, which means there is space for the improvement of the participatory approach used, for example, with some SAS<sup>2</sup> specific techniques.

## **5. Conclusions**

After the bibliographic research we could understand that the public participation is a very important tool to the environmental decision making because it provides a better decision when planned as an inclusive, cooperative, fair and adaptable participatory process.

It was also possible to conclude that in Portugal the public participation was considered legally a very important part of the democracy (and that's the reason why the first mention to public participation appears in the Portuguese constitution) since it allows the integration of the people's worries into the matters of state.

Even though there are lots of specific legislation talking about public participation, all of them are very vague and do not recommend any participatory method, leading to the use of passive methods, while they should use active ones that would really contribute to the stakeholders engagement.

The practice of public participation in Portugal is very deficient, especially because there is a lack of specific methods, according the different situation's specific characteristics, and because there is a lack of transparency and promotion in participatory methods.

Nevertheless, it's important to stress out the role of "Local Agenda 21" to the development of active participatory methods such as "participative budget" for example.

While studying SAS<sup>2</sup> method, we found out he could provide what is missing in the practice of public participation in Portugal, due to its enormous flexibility.

With its techniques, we should get a contribution to achieve and develop the critical sense of people and also get an easier understanding of the issues inherent to participatory processes.

Regarding the case study, it was concluded that the participatory process that occurred in Cova da Moura neighborhood was reasonable, and that's why it was understood that for that reason there were some space to improve it with the help of SAS<sup>2</sup> method.

Being more specific, it was thought that SAS<sup>2</sup> would help because the population of Cova da Moura is mainly constituted by

young people with low levels of education, so it could provide a stimulation of interest.

To achieve that it was also thought that some SAS<sup>2</sup> techniques namely the tree diagram, gaps and conflicts, causal dynamics, force field and stakeholder's identification would be benefic, in order to show more easily the important issues to be discussed in the participatory process.

The use of these techniques could improve the results of the participatory process and also the perceptions of people about it due to its pictorial nature and simplicity.

As for future recommendations it was found that if a manual of specific participatory techniques (based on SAS<sup>2</sup> or other collaborative inquiry method) was written, probably the decision-makers would be incited to use them, instead of the passive methods usually used in first instance.

The use of these types of methods would also solve the use of inappropriate language that the decision-makers/technicians use when dealing to common people.

The manual should be written in a simple way, be easily comprehensible and should be available freely in order for it to be

considered as a transparent participatory tool.

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