

PLANNING FOR CLIMATE ADAPTATION: IS PUBLIC PARTICIPATION THE KEY TO SUCCESS?

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Abstract

In many policy arenas it is assumed that successful policy measures depend on the application of effective strategies for public participation and engagement. The putative benefits of more rather than less public participation are many and include better framed and more robust policies and more informed, articulate and engaged citizens. To date the empirical testing of these assumed benefits has, however, lagged behind their articulation.

In the field of climate change and in particular the processes of adapting to changes already locked into place, there is a similar presumption that participation and engagement are vital to the success of any adaptation strategy. In this paper we explore this presumption and consider whether or not it is more or less critical to the success of planning for unavoidable climate change than it is to any other sphere of public policy intervention. We test these assumptions through a critical review of adaptation policy instruments at Federal, state, regional and local scales in Australia. The focus here is mostly on the state of Queensland and the region of South East Queensland in particular.

We find that the timing, role and value of public participation in adaptation differ not only between these instruments but that they all build on an underlying assumption of the public's willingness to engage in adaptation. Furthermore, there are few signs that the possible impacts of greater public participation on the effectiveness of climate adaptation policy are being subjected to empirical scrutiny and hence the commitment to this approach remains a matter of faith.

1. INTRODUCTION

It is now commonplace to acknowledge that anticipated changes to the global climate present one of the biggest challenges to humanity. In Australia this challenge has been described as the epitome of a wicked issue (Burton, 2009a, Head, 2008), labelled a diabolical problem by Ross Garnaut and infamously heralded as the 'greatest moral challenge of our time' by former Prime Minister Kevin Rudd.

It is also becoming increasingly commonplace for responses to wicked issues or diabolical problems to be based on an assumption that more participatory and deliberative approaches are in some ways better than approaches that rely on more centralised and exclusive systems of decision making. This commitment to participatory and deliberative forms of democracy applies, to varying degrees, across a range of different policy fields and at different scales of government or political debate from the global to the local (Burton, 2009b, Few et al., 2007, Forester, 1999, Hopkins, 2010).

It is not surprising, therefore, that debate about the best way to respond to global climate change includes many passionate calls for more participation and deliberation. While this applies to responses designed primarily to reduce the causes of global warming and climate change, it is even more evident in debates about how best to adapt to climate change that is already happening and which will continue regardless of the successes of mitigation and abatement measures.

To some extent this even greater commitment to participation and deliberation in the development of adaptation policy and practice arises from the belief that adaptation is inevitably and properly a local scale activity. Approaches to policy development and practical implementation that are based on participatory and deliberative approaches are certainly more manageable at the local scale than at greater scales, be they national or international. Indeed the problem of scale has been described as one of the greatest challenges facing participatory democracy: can the principles that might work at a local scale be applied at much larger scales?

While the benefits of more participatory and deliberative approaches to government, in its broadest sense, are now commonplace, the empirical testing of these assumptions is less common (Burton, 2009b, Burton et al., 2006, Few et al., 2006, Rowe et al., 2008). While some argue that it is inappropriate to even question or to test these assumptions, we believe that only by doing so can the practice of participatory and deliberative government be improved and even the most cursory consideration of local planning in response to climate change suggests room for improvement.

This paper develops a framework for scrutinising the articulation and implementation of principles of participatory and deliberative planning and then applies this framework to a set of plans designed to support and manage local responses under unavoidable climate change. These plans are the product of different levels of government in Australia with the most local focusing on the Gold Coast in the South East Queensland region. Our focus lies mostly on the state of Queensland and the region of South East Queensland in particular.

The paper is arranged as follows: section two looks at theories of participation particularly in planning, while section three examines the practice of planning for adaptation in Australia and describes the process of adaptation from the perspective of policy development. Section four tests the framework on federal, state, regional and local adaptation policies and also incorporates qualitative interview data with key local government stakeholders regarding public participation and climate adaptation. Section five offers a discussion and conclusions on how we see and understand the role of public participation in adaptation policy processes, and what evaluative frameworks on public participation could offer for different levels of government in their responses to climate change.

2. THEORIES OF PARTICIPATION IN PLANNING

Cavaye (2004) notes that in Australia there has been a growing expectation among the public to be involved in governance arrangements, including in processes of policy deliberation, development and scrutiny (Scott and Baehler, 2010). According to Cavaye (2004), however, public involvement and community engagement are not novel approaches in Australia but rather draw on extensive experience in natural resource management collaborative bodies, citizen associations and partnerships in such sectors as health care and emergency management.

As Sherry Arnstein (Arnstein, 1969) so eloquently put it in the introduction to her seminal essay 'A ladder of citizen participation',

The idea of citizen participation is a little like eating spinach, no one is against it in principle because it is good for you.

However, as she goes on to point out, what is so widely seen as such a good thing in principle is sometimes seen in a slightly different light if the demand for greater participation comes from certain quarters rather than others. In her case she was referring to a broad spectrum of North American 'have-nots', but a similar concern can be seen in contemporary Australian debates about how we might best plan for unavoidable climate change. While many of us would claim to support the general principle of more rather than less public participation in planning for climate change, we may be concerned if certain groups are given undue prominence in these participatory processes.

While Arnstein used the metaphor of a ladder as an analytical device to help distinguish between 'understated euphemisms and exacerbated rhetoric' she remained convinced of the intrinsic merits of participation and its importance in the wider political project of redistributing power and influence in favour of the 'have-nots'.

In this section we interrogate the merits of public participation or community engagement in rather more detail, so that we are better placed to assess more precisely what is being proposed as a means of improving our planning for climate change.

Richardson (1983) offers a useful distinction between the developmental and the instrumental benefits of participation. Developmental benefits focus on the individuals who are encouraged, allowed or helped to participate in various processes of public deliberation and can take many forms. Participants receive a degree of confirmation of their value or worth as citizens, bolstering the notion that not only are we all equal in the eyes of the law but that as equal citizens we all have something of value to contribute to processes of public deliberation. Through participating we also enjoy the opportunity to learn more about an issue, perhaps coming to appreciate more of its complexity, or 'wickedness' in the case of many policy issues associated with climate change, and about our capacity to make a useful contribution to public debate.

In a similar vein participants may come to develop a more sophisticated appreciation of their own interests as well as their knowledge and perhaps use this to modify public expressions of their own social identity. Thus, participation not only provides an important opportunity to perform as, for example, a local environmental activist or as a climate change sceptic or as a parent, it also allows new identities to be explored and adopted. Finally, to the extent that public participation is structured as a social event involving face to face meeting and debate, then it is believed to improve our sociability and to help foster stronger community ties, even to build social capital.

Of course each of these assumed benefits can be challenged. New forms of electronic or online participation may serve to keep people in their homes and at their computers rather than encouraging sociability. Personal views may become more entrenched as a result of participation, not because new evidence or argument was deployed, but because the structure of the participatory event encouraged polarisation and conflict rather than respectful listening and learning. Participants may become more confused through their exposure to a variety of alternative positions and find this debilitating or annoying to the point that their civic-mindedness is reduced.

The instrumental benefits identified by Richardson relate not to the participants, but to the products of their participation. It is claimed (or sometimes simply assumed) that policies developed or decisions taken as a result of greater public participation will be better than those made with less participation. Better is often taken to have two components: managerial efficiency and political legitimacy. In other words, the decision or policy is better (or more efficient) because it has been subject to a wider range of scrutiny from a more diverse set of participants, thereby reducing the risk of deleterious 'groupthink' and unchallenged assumptions. The decision or policy also has more legitimacy simply because more people were involved in some way in the process of deliberation and development; there is less scope to criticise it as the product of a small group with little exposure to the views and preferences of the majority of 'ordinary people'.

Again, these assumptions can be challenged. How are we to measure whether one decision or policy is better than another or than it might otherwise have been? How do we determine political legitimacy –on the basis of newspaper headlines, the size of protest rallies, or through opinion polls?

Our concern is less with the theoretical challenges to these putative benefits, but with the empirical assessment of them. However, the two are of course linked as the previous paragraph illustrates. It is important to construct meaningful and robust measures of these benefits in theory before we can try to measure them in practice. In the following sections we attempt to apply some of these measures, albeit in a rudimentary manner, to a range of significant climate change adaptation policy documents and planning strategies.

We have chosen three main questions about participation to apply to these documents: who participates; on what terms and at which scale? It should be noted that these questions are applied to both the way in which the document itself was produced and to any approaches and proposals it might make about planning for climate change in the future. In this way we hope to be able to make an initial assessment of this set of key policy documents in terms of the extent to which they turn broad statements of the benefits of participation into more tangible and measurable actions.

3. THE PRACTICE OF PLANNING FOR ADAPTATION

3.1. Adaptation Planning in Australia

Adaptation planning has emerged as one of the key policy responses to climate change in recent years (Abel et al., 2011, Measham et al., 2011, Næss et al., 2005, Norman, 2010, Preston et al., 2010, Tompkins et al., 2010). De Bruin et al. (2009) remind us that the most important policy issue for developed countries is to align their adaptation policies and spatial planning regimes and furthermore that the efficient assessment of adaptation options plays one of the most important roles in delivering better adaptation policies.

A range of policies and strategies have been identified in order to better prepare societies to deal with the projected impacts of climate change. These have centred around coastal management solutions, such as building protective infrastructure and strengthening coastal ecosystems (Adger et al., 2007, Tol et al., 2008, Tomlinson and Helman, 2006, Tompkins, 2005), investing in climate related data, management and research (Hallegatte, 2009, Hallegatte and Corfee-Morlot, 2010, Kay and Travers, 2008, Klein and Tol, 1999), and promoting adaptation focused planning in general (Parry and Carter, 1998, Preston et al., 2009, Preston et al., 2010, Tribbia and Moser, 2008, Urwin and Jordan, 2008).

A strong argument has been made to begin adaptation sooner rather than later (Hallegatte, 2009, Tol et al., 2008) in order to share responsibilities and costs involved, and to identify the roles of different levels of government in adaptation (McDonald, 2010, Measham et al., 2011). In Australia, this has materialised

through different policies, funding initiatives and assessments across the Federal, State and local government levels. For instance, the Commonwealth government has invested heavily in vulnerability assessments (Department of Climate Change, 2009), policy development initiatives (Department of Climate Change and Energy Efficiency, 2010, Commonwealth of Australia, 2009), and outlined its policy positions regarding climate adaptation (Department of Climate Change, 2010).

At state level, policies and planning have focused on managing long-term impacts, such as sea level rise in Queensland and New South Wales (Department of Environment and Resource Management, 2011, Department of Environment, 2009) and bushfire risks in Victoria (Department of Sustainability and Environment, 2008). A significant role in both State and Federal plans has been allocated to local governments due to the common understanding that the local level is often best placed to provide and implement climate adaptation in practice (Measham et al., 2011, Preston et al., 2008, Mustelin, 2011).

Local governments have responded through the development of climate-specific plans and policies (Gold Coast City Council, 2009, Sunshine Coast Regional Council, 2009) in order to provide a better understanding of how local scale is affected by and can respond through a selection of strategies. However, it should be noted that although the local level is seen by many as the optimal level of government for local adaptation, reducing vulnerability requires actions at multiple scales in order to be effective (Næss et al., 2005). This is why in this paper we explore these challenges of multi-level governance through an analysis of policy statements and strategies from the Federal, State and local levels of government.

Nevertheless, although different plans and policies have been developed at these levels of government, there still exists confusion as to who is responsible for what, particularly in terms of funding and legal liability in regards to climate change specific adaptation strategies.

3.2. Policies as Adaptation Instruments: 4 cases

Following Scott and Baehler (2010) we understand policies as ‘...a stance or attitude towards a set of related issues..’ and make a further distinction between formal and *de facto* policy. For instance, deciding not to engage with a specific policy issue entails taking a *de facto* policy stance, whereas formal written policies explicitly spell out what needs to happen and how. In other words, both policy forms reflect explicitly or implicitly current institutional values and thinking about particular issues in a society.

In this paper, the focus is on formal policy in the strategic policy sphere where decisions are made on the basis of government’s overall policy stance. Current climate change policies and strategies are found in this sphere as these represent the way a particular level of government aims to deal with climate change. However, simultaneously it is understood that often the strategic, responsive and operational policy spheres overlap and feed into each other, and that *de facto* policies also greatly affect what becomes formal policy.

Policies as adaptation instruments spell out how a particular level of government treats climate adaptation, what essentially is the nature of the perceived problem, and what solutions are brought forward. We do acknowledge, however, that policies do not exist in a social or political vacuum in which one policy dictates all possible aspects and mechanisms of forming a particular response. We recognise the possible links to other activities and policies, which also influence a government’s stance. Next, we summarise briefly the four policy documents chosen before critically reviewing what they say about participation both in their own construction and in their advocacy of future change.

Commonwealth’s Adaptation Position White Paper 2010

This sets out the Commonwealth government’s aims, scope and means to develop a national climate change adaptation policy agenda. The aim is to clarify the different roles and responsibilities among different levels of governments and stakeholder groups respectively. As everyone will be affected by climate change, a collaborative effort is required. Adaptation is understood and treated as a new but long-term challenge, which requires building up capacity among other stakeholders over long timeframes and which takes a risk management to planning for the future.

State, Territories and local governments are seen as having a larger role in direct adaptation, while the majority of adaptation efforts will be most likely undertaken by businesses and communities. Commonwealth government’s role is to create the right conditions for these adaptive actions. The national priority areas are identified as coastal management, water, infrastructure, natural systems of national significance; prevention, preparedness, response and recovery with regard to natural disaster, and agriculture (Department of Climate Change, 2010).

Queensland Climate Q

This document sets out the most important priorities for Queensland State in terms of projected climate change impacts, possible responses and future priorities. It updates and confirms other policies including *ClimateSmart 2050: Queensland Climate Change Strategy 2007* (Queensland Government, 2007a), and *Queensland's ClimateSmart Adaptation 2007-2012: An action plan for managing the impacts of climate change* (Queensland Government, 2007b).

Five key themes underpin the Queensland government's approach: reducing greenhouse gas emissions; lowering the costs to households and businesses; investing in the productive future of key industries; protecting Queensland's natural wonders, and adapting to the impacts of climate change (Queensland Government, 2009). The adaptation plan includes 62 actions with a strong focus on research components and capacity building (Dedekorkut et al., 2010).

South East Queensland Climate Change Management Plan (Draft)

This plan sets out the regional climate change considerations and is part of the South East Queensland Regional Management Plan 2009-2031. The draft version has 32 policy statements of which thirteen deal specifically with adaptation with a focus on natural hazards and coastal issues. The plan also allocates responsibilities among different government departments and sets out preliminary schedules for the implementation of the proposed strategies (Department of Infrastructure and Planning, 2009).

Gold Coast City Council's Climate Change Strategy 2009-2014

The Gold Coast City Council's adaptation plan and strategy, *Setting Direction, Enabling action* clusters around five strategic outcome areas: governance and leadership; research, advocacy and awareness; infrastructure; and planning and regulation (Gold Coast City Council, 2009). The strategy has 35 key actions, of which some relate to council mitigation or adaptation actions, while others relate to community mitigation or adaptation actions. Emphasis is given to the opportunities for harnessing the benefits of new carbon technologies and markets on the Gold Coast and the potential economic benefits of mitigation activities.

4. EMPIRICAL APPLICATION OF CRITERIA FOR PUBLIC PARTICIPATION

In this section we consider each of the four strategies in terms of the key questions described above: who is to participate; on what terms and at which scale?

Commonwealth Adaptation Position White Paper 2010

Of the four policies examined, the Commonwealth adaptation White Paper is clearly directed at the broadest scale, focusing on statements of principle as it develops a national policy agenda for adaptation by other bodies. The 'who' in this strategy includes everyone, insofar as it excludes no one from responsibility for developing adaptation actions:

Meeting this challenge will require contributions from governments at all levels, businesses, communities and individuals (p. 1)

In terms of our analytical framework, this represents an instance in which the rhetoric of inclusivity is more significant than the presentation of a more precise description of who specifically has responsibility for action.

The terms of participation are viewed through the lens of defined responsibilities in which governments, communities and businesses are all responsible for climate adaptation. This does not however extend to participation *per se* in the development of the national agenda by these parties. Questions as to how citizens could help shape the agenda are not included, and the document does not actually use the word participation:

...much of the national effort to adapt to the impacts of climate change will be actions taken by businesses and communities...The private benefits individuals and households can gain from adapting to climate change provides an incentive for them to take reasonable steps to manage their exposure to those risks, and so reduce the potential costs to them of climate change (p. 7)

The terms of participation in this strategy are presented in very general terms, such as information sharing, and the community is not invited to make further submissions to the national adaptation agenda other than through an expert workshop on national coastal adaptation agenda. The development of a national coastal adaptation agenda involves a wide range of stakeholders, selected by others and in some cases elected. Reference is also made to the National Climate Change Adaptation Research Facility (NCCARF), which is

also collaborating with key stakeholders in producing relevant research for the implementation of climate adaptation in Australia.

It is not mentioned whether public consultation took place in the formulation of the strategy although it should be acknowledged that there have been other opportunities to voice concerns and participate in Commonwealth processes, for instance in the Parliamentary Inquiry (Managing Our Coastal Zone in the Changing Climate). However, little is said how that specific process has influenced the current adaptation policy stance.

Queensland ClimateQ

The scale of the Queensland Government's ClimateQ strategy is, unsurprisingly, state-wide. It is designed to provide a state level context for the development of more specific local plans and in this sense serves as a classic framing document.

The 'who' in this strategy also includes everyone as potential participants in the process.

It extends and strengthens our climate change response to help everyone to take action today for tomorrow (p. i)

The terms of participation include the engagement of community groups in policy debates, the opportunity to join in education forums and participation in planning by making submissions. While this does not imply a strong sense of public participation in policy making there is an assumption that increased information leads to greater public awareness, which results in more resilient communities and hence a successful adaptation outcome.

We urge you to get involved in the Queensland response where you can make the biggest difference (p. ii)

and

Effective community engagement, education and planning will enable people and organisations to take preparedness actions and reduce the costs and other associated impacts of an event (p. 145)

Public participation was also evident in the formulation of the strategy which makes reference to several public comments made during the policy development process and provides examples of how the government considered these submissions in developing the strategy.

The terms of public participation in the policy development process fall into the category of 'help to construct proposals' as public submissions were used to determine which issues should be addressed in the strategy. However, little is said how public participation might continue to be used in the future.

The scope of the strategy, which combines several policies fields, is extensive but most space for public participation is given through education and awareness campaigns or programs such as *Climate Heroes*, which aim to support and promote environmentally friendly behaviour at workplaces and at home. In this program, the participants receive information on how to live more sustainably and in this respect public participation in the future is viewed primarily as individual behavioural change rather than as participation in policy development or decision-making processes.

South East Queensland Climate Change Management Plan (Draft)

The South East Queensland Climate Change Management Plan (SEQCCMP) remains in draft form but calls for public participation in the policy development process without providing much detail on how public participation is supposed to benefit or be used in the process. The draft policy was developed using selective consultation events held with 'experts' although further opportunities were offered for wider forms of public consultation through electronic or written submissions and through discussions in public workshops.

The Foreword to the plan sets out a fairly conventional statement of the value of participation: 'Your feedback on these actions will help to make South East Queensland a better region for current and future generations'. It goes on to describe a set of 'regional aspirations and characteristics for sustainable development' before setting out more detailed actions. These characteristics of sustainable development (p.12-13) do not refer specifically to public participation in policymaking processes but in a section headed 'Climate Change Aspirations for SEQ' (p. 14-15), residents are described as being 'keen to contribute to sustainable planning outcomes', although how this might be done is left unexplained.

Residents are also invited to 'respect decision makers who intelligently address climate change with conviction and foresight (p. 15). Again, what this means in practice is left rather vague: does it mean that the public is not respecting the views of decision-makers at the moment or is it simply a gently reminder that decision makers are faced with difficult choices and usually attempt to make them with the best of intentions?

Of the draft adaptation actions listed, only actions under the heading 'biodiversity' include the community as one of the responsible groups to take action. Another program of action (*to increase community awareness and influence behaviour regarding actions to build resilience to natural hazards and climate change in SEQ*, p. 35) puts responsibility for behavioural change and awareness onto different state agencies, local governments and industry but not to the public itself. This is interesting as it is here that members of the public might be expected to participate if the underlying belief in government is really that greater public participation in adaptation would create stronger communities. Instead, influencing behaviour is seen primarily as a government-led process.

Gold Coast City Council's Climate Change Strategy 2009-2014

The Gold Coast City Council's climate change strategy was developed within the Council's risk management approach to planning and policy making. This policy development process did not involve public participation in any form although the policy itself clearly sets responsibilities and requirements for the community in general. The policy distinguishes clearly between mitigation and adaptation measures under taken by Council itself, and those undertaken by others in the city. The strategy defines community adaptation as 'managing and reducing the vulnerability of the Gold Coast community to the potential impacts of climate change and maximising the potential opportunities also presented' (p. 4).

Under the heading of 'Key actions for Advocacy and Awareness' the strategy recommends the establishment of information sharing and collaborative partnerships with community service providers to manage the risks of climate change for the city and the development and delivery of an integrated community-wide education and awareness campaign on climate change mitigation and adaptation. Both of these actions rely on consistent and strong Council action and rely on the assumption that the community is willing to participate in adaptation. They also sit at the bottom end of Arnstein's ladder in their focus on education and awareness rather than the co-production of policies or decisions.

5. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

This preliminary analysis of a small set of climate change adaptation policies and strategies produced by all levels of government in Australia suggests that while there is a clear discourse about the importance of involving the public in the development of their policies and strategies, there is little detail about how these commitments might be put into practice and hence made meaningful.

At the national, sub-regional and local levels climate change management plans do little to convey what forms of public participation might be used in practice and to what effect. The State level plan in Queensland offers more specific examples in the form of actual programs but does not link these clearly to the different forms public participation in the policy process and decision-making.

Following Arnstein's notion of no one being in principle against citizen participation, none of the strategies we have examined argue for more participation in the policy process than is the norm, but all display a strong underlying assumption about the willingness of members of the public to participate in policy making in this field. None of the strategies described in detail how this might take place in practice, other than calling for traditional submissions to draft policies, and the Commonwealth plan in particular seems to delegate responsibility for adaptation to all other actors when it comes to the implementation and actually taking action on the ground.

There is also a significant difference in all of the strategies examined between calls for greater participation in the implementation of plans and policies and participation in policy development: there is much more of the former and less of the latter. We suspect the public at large appreciate this lack of symmetry and remain somewhat sceptical of the commitment of government bodies to what is often described as 'genuine participation' in such circumstances.

Also absent in these strategies is any reference to how public participation (whether in policy development or adaptation in general) and its benefits are to be evaluated. The assumed benefits relate to stronger and more resilient communities but only in relation to individual and community behavioural change, and not the

public's participation in the policy development processes themselves. This is perhaps not surprising as many major plans and strategies fail to build any element of evaluation into their work programs, despite public commitments to evidence based policy making and to finding out 'what works?'. More specifically, it is often difficult to develop theoretically robust and practically feasible frameworks for the evaluation of complex policy interventions such as climate change adaptation (Burton, 2009).

We propose that in order for planning to fulfil its role in creating sustainable land-use plans under projected climate change impacts, there needs to be a better understanding of the way public participation could enhance the planning process. It cannot be assumed that more participation is necessarily better, while it must be acknowledged that decisions over future land use as an adaptation strategy must become legitimized through a certain level of social acceptance among the public.

It might also be that greater public participation in adaptation policy development comes when policies begin to tangibly affect individuals and communities. It is thus not the policy development process, which is interesting to the public but rather its practical implications. Unfortunately the public is often disinterested during the process of policy negotiations, apart from the engaged few who represent the small but politically active section of the society. Such general disengagement is common with all policy issues and not especially different for climate adaptation policies. However, in the case of anticipatory adaptation (taking action now based on uncertain futures) this could become a more significant component in terms of lack of support and even resistance to policy implementation.

Creating increased public awareness of climate change and of government policies seeking to address the projected impacts might backfire on governments if they simply assume that their communities are willing and eager to engage in these processes. Adaptation made easy should be the first priority in policy development but this also relies on the legitimacy of the proposed actions and agenda in the eyes of the public which is expected to participate. How to harness these positive opportunities for meaningful and effective public participation, and how to evaluate these benefits from the perspective of policy development, is a crucial area that demands future research. This relates to issues of increased transparency and legitimacy of policy making processes and would benefit both governments and the public at large.

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