

# Organizing Public Participation: A Critical Review of Three Handbooks

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## Introduction

Handbooks and guidebooks give advice to would-be practitioners on how to do public participation well (Bleiker and Bleiker 1995; Connor 1994; Creighton 1985, 1993; ERM 1995; English et al. 1993; EPA 1983; Farhar and Babiuch 1993; Howell, Olsen and Olsen 1987; Thomas 1995). They offer a cookbook solution to the troubled official who is pressed to implement a state-of-the-art program, but is inexperienced in doing so. Although I have reservations about taking a cookbook approach too far, I also believe it does have a place in the field at the moment. In this review I attempt to build awareness about the availability of these handbooks and manuals. Doing so is an important step in promoting learning and the betterment of public participation. Better public participation can lead to a better state of public affairs. If we trust in the reasonableness of the publics—and I assert that the vast majority of us in this field do—then we also trust that better public participation also moves us closer to realizing the principles of sustainability and balance.<sup>1</sup>

## The Formula

Handbooks approach their task with logic and consistency. The formula is straightforward. They typically begin with observations about the practice of public participation (“If the public feels that a decision was made in an inappropriate way, they will not accept it.”). They then recite fundamental lessons, principles, objectives, or criteria of “good” public participation (“Avoid confrontations between high-level officials of opposing interests until the staff has worked out a compromise.”). These lessons may also be phrased in the form of critical questions that planners should ask (“Is the proposed process compatible with legal obligations?”). With criteria in hand, the authors next turn to a repertoire of techniques—sometimes called models, techniques, or approaches. They describe the techniques and may sort them into categories. As a grand finale, some handbooks evaluate each technique on the criteria or objectives, producing a kind of *Consumer Reports* style summary, with empty circles for poor performance and colored circles for excellent performance. A few go on to guide the planner through the process of putting together a public-participation process that is right for the job.

Here, I examine three examples of handbooks. I chose these three because they are, in my opinion, some of the best

available. The first was prepared by a private consultant team for use in their training seminars. It targets a wide array of users and application topics. The second was prepared for investors in development projects in Eastern and Central Europe. However, it is applicable to a broad and general audience of practitioners in any country and on any theme. The third was prepared for the U.S. Department of Energy. Although it was written in the context of contaminated site clean-up, the book is applicable to many more users and applications.

## Exhibits: Samplings from Collection

**A. Bleiker and H. Bleiker. 1995. *Public Participation Handbook for Officials and Other Professionals Serving the Public, Ninth Edition*. Monterey, CA.: Institute for Participatory Management and Planning. Tel: (408) 373-4292 [ipmp@aol.com](mailto:ipmp@aol.com)**

There is a strong logical structure to this handbook. At the apex is the assertion that the purpose of organizing public-participation activities is to acquire the informed consent of all potentially impacted parties. Informed consent, in the authors' definition, means that the potentially impacted parties do not use their (informal) “veto power” to stop a decision process. For the public-participation process to build informed consent, it needs to achieve three general objectives. It needs to demonstrate responsibility, responsiveness, and effectiveness. For each of these objectives are listed five subobjectives (Table 1).

In the handbook, these objectives are preceded by a list of sixty public-participation principles. For the most part, these are observations more than principles. Too numerous to repeat here, I merely list the subheading names with one example from each heading:

- Why your projects and programs get stopped.

*Citizens have learned that no issue is impossible to fight if it threatens the stability of a neighborhood or community.*

- Why your public wants to be reasonable and responsible.

*While the various interests who make up the public are capable of making requests, voicing desires, and listing wants and needs that are quite unreasonable, in the end, the public is capable of discerning between legitimate and illegitimate needs.*

Table 1. Fifteen Public Participation Objectives (Source: Bleiker and Bleiker; 1995)

### Responsibility

*You have to...*

1. Establish the legitimacy of your agency and your project.
2. Maintain the legitimacy of your agency and your project.
3. Establish the legitimacy of your problem-solving and decision-making process.
4. Maintain the legitimacy of your problem-solving and decision-making process.
5. Establish and maintain the legitimacy of earlier decisions and assumptions.

### Responsiveness

6. Get to know all the potentially affected interests (PAIs).
7. Get to see the project through their eyes.
8. Identify and understand problems.
9. Generate alternative solutions.
10. Articulate and clarify key issues.

### Effectiveness

11. Protect and enhance your credibility.
12. Have all the information that you need to communicate to the various interests received and understood by them.
13. Receive and understand all the information that the various PAIs need to communicate with you.
14. Depolarize PAIs who are polarized because they have diametrically opposed values.
15. Depolarize interests who are polarized for some other reason.

- What really counts is informed consent.

*If the public perceives the decision-making process to be fair, it is willing to live with a project that impacts different interests unequally.*

- Some basics of how public participation works.

*It is very difficult to collect and communicate information about peoples' values and there are relatively few techniques for doing it.*

- How various interests affect public participation.

*The biggest obstacle to broad participation is something we call citizen apathy.*

- How your motives, perceptions, values, and abilities affect it.

*Issues that appear perfectly clear to the professional project staff may not be clear at all to a lay person.*

- What public participation can accomplish for you.

*Conflict between different private interests can play a major role in an agency's problem-solving ability.*

- Some do's and don'ts of public participation.

*Your credibility is one of your most indispensable resources.*

- Some public participation dilemmas.

*It is inherently difficult for a large bureaucracy to interact with a lay citizen.*

Process design is an exercise of first assessing and prioritizing needs vis-a-vis the 15 objectives (Table 1) and then choosing techniques that can deliver on those needs. It is completed using very detailed worksheets that come in the handbook. Each worksheet corresponds to one objective and contains a number of questions related to that objective. The purpose of the questions is to have the planner reflect upon all of the facets of the objective. Going through this activity would take hours and is sure to immerse the planner in the subject, promoting deep contemplation.

Once objectives are grouped into high, medium, or low priority, the planner reviews the toolbox of public-participation techniques available. This handbook contains a most inclusive list of 38 techniques. For each one, the authors have prepared evaluations on how well the technique helps to meet each of the 15 objectives. By matching up the needs identified in the early steps (that is, the high priority objectives) with the techniques that performed well on this objective, a process design begins to emerge.

The authors emphasize that process design must be tailored around the specific needs and constraints of the project. The process itself is always seen as a hybrid process, one that produces a concatenation of individual techniques. When

assembling these together into a complete process, it is necessary to consider how the techniques complement each other's strengths and weaknesses. For example, a distinction is made between "meeting type" techniques and "written type" techniques (Chapter VI:13) and they suggest balancing the two. Although they provide assessments of each technique on the 15 objectives, these are only used as a crude measure of appropriateness. The users are expected to become highly knowledgeable with the techniques. Then they are able to make assessments about how to apply the different techniques with much higher accuracy (Chapter VI:14).

Because they consider themselves as trainers and coaches, the Bleikers emphasize the need to train personnel in how to carry out the tasks involved in the public-participation process. They believe in having the professional staff associated with the project as deeply involved in the participation process as possible. (As opposed to having the public-participation process run by experts in public relations.) "We have found that it is far better to give civil engineers a little training in "How to Conduct a Hearing" than to take public-participation specialists and try to make them knowledgeable about the engineering issues" (Chapter VI:20).

The major weakness in this handbook is in the last step in their process—the evaluation/feedback step. Although they emphasize the importance of monitoring the project and correcting for problems that arise, they give no specific advice for how to do this well. Since there is a huge literature associated with program evaluation and the evaluation of public participation in particular, the absence of its treatment in an otherwise very inclusive handbook is curious. Also surprising was the unusual definition of "informed consent," a term with a substantial literature. Schrader-Frechette has reviewed the literature of this term and has deconstructed it into four dimensions: voluntariness, full disclosure, understanding, and competence (1993, 367). Most of these features seem to be captured in the Bleiker's conceptual framework, however, so it is not clear that there would be anything gained from reorganizing the conceptual categories.

**Environmental Resources Management (ERM). 1995. *Manual on Public Participation for Investors in Central and Eastern Europe and the Former Soviet Union. Final Report to the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development.* London: Environmental Resources Management. Tel: +44 (171) 465 7200. (8 Cavendish Sq, London W1M 0ER).<sup>2</sup>**

Based on the reasoning that investment decisions made with public participation will be financially more sound than those made without it, this manual aims to advise investors about how to do public participation well. It is distributed to potential investors by the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD). One thing that makes this document unique is its focus on translating lessons learned from western countries to the context of central and eastern Europe and the former states of the Soviet Union. Annex A is a unique

resource. It is a country-by-country summary of the legal basis for public participation and a brief synopsis of local experiences. In addition, peppered throughout the document in the margins are short anecdotes about participation projects in the region. These illustrate the points being made in the text and they serve to better acquaint the reader with the state of affairs in the countries. The geographical focus aside, this manual is useful to anyone preparing a public-participation project.

This manual starts with the observation that, when a new project (dam, power line, bridge, factory, etc.) is proposed, most people who would be potentially impacted do not demand or necessarily want full and equal participation in the actual decision making. Most people are not willing to make the commitment of time and effort that is required of that kind of intense participation. Instead, people want a variety of avenues of participation, from lower to higher intensity (Table 2). And they want to be able to make a personal choice about what level of participation is appropriate to them. Some only want information about the project. Others will want to have their input considered. A few will want to actually participate in making the decision.<sup>3</sup> The manual advises planners to provide for participation at all three of these levels.

*Table 2. Three Objectives of Public Participation*

- Conveying information to the public.
- Listening to the opinions and preferences of the public.
- Involving the public in making decisions.

For each of the three objectives, a matrix is supplied that rates the performance of a number of the most appropriate techniques. For instance, for the "Informing the Public" objective, the techniques of interactive television, newspapers, and at-home/coffee meetings receive the most checkmarks. News conferences and direct mail are given only one. In addition, each technique is also ranked on a number of affiliated factors under two categories: Target Audience (size of audience, type of audience, technical content) and Institutional Needs (skill level required, cost). The evaluations do not take into consideration any of the contextual issues (such as culture, society, economy, etc.) that would shape performance.

Thirty-nine public-participation techniques are reviewed in this manual. For each there is a brief one-page description and discussion of advantages and constraints. While these descriptions are good for presenting a very sketchy overview, they are clearly inadequate to inform the novice. For example, the complete text under description of the planning cell technique is as follows:

The goal of planning cells is to allocate and mobilise resources locally, in order to solve defined tasks. After discussions in formal sessions, working parties, sub-divided according to their interests, are set up to discuss the current situation and how it might evolve, what actions are required

and what resources are available. Suggestions are provided to main interest groups. New working parties suggest specific projects within every group.

In the United States, Germany, and Switzerland, more sophisticated versions of the planning cell are being developed. For instance, in Germany the members of the group are randomly selected, uninformed members of the public representing local interest groups, and if necessary are given extended briefings and trainings to improve their understanding of the issues to be addressed.

This is a typical example of the level of detail provided. Obviously it is of only limited value. Also missing are references that would show the interested reader where to turn for more information on a given technique.

The major weakness of this report is that it does not address the situational factors or clues that a planner should be on the lookout for and which signify the need to focus on one of another level of participation (whether in the design stage or during implementation and evaluation). In the Bleiker's, handbook, this is accomplished by way of the reflective questions asked for each of the fifteen objectives. And, although the EBRD manual does list principles of public participation, they are never connected with the objectives stated later or with the evaluations of the techniques.

**M. English, A. Gibson, D. Feldman, and B. Tonn. 1993. *Stakeholder Involvement: Open Processes for Reaching Decisions About the Future Uses of Contaminated Sites. Final Report to the U.S. Department of Energy. University of Tennessee, Knoxville: Waste Management Research and Education Institute. Tel: (423) 974-4251 (600 Henley Street, Suite 311, Knoxville, TN 37996-4134).***

This report is intended to provide some guidance to the Department of Energy in their efforts to organize public participation in decision making about cleaning up contaminated sites.<sup>4</sup> Because the focus of the report is on process, however, it is applicable to the practice of public participation in general. In fact, there is very little in this report about the contextual issues of contaminated site problems or how these factors should enter into the design or implementation of a public-participation process. Thirteen techniques are addressed. Criteria for good processes are developed, but the techniques are not evaluated on these criteria. The authors assert that techniques cannot be evaluated generically, because how they are implemented determines performance more than do the attributes of the techniques (English et al. 1993, 50).

The "central thesis" of the report by English et al. is that, "we advocate seeking to attain a normative consensus—one in which stakeholders focus on the greater social good rather than simply on their individual stakes" (ibid., iv). They state several key problems associated with achieving normative consensus (ibid., 20):

- Group size (small groups are easier than larger groups because solidarity formation is more difficult and because it is difficult to have good discourse).

- Understandings of community needs (this is harder with a heterogeneous community).
- Requires people to sacrifice self interest on behalf of social good.

Still, normative consensus should be the guiding principle in organizing public participation, says the report, *even if the final decision is made through some other means*. They argue that the process leading up to the decision is more important than the decision itself. What the authors appear to be trying to get at by emphasizing normative consensus is simply that the participants ought to pursue the common good rather than more egoistic aims.<sup>5</sup>

A strong point is the list of ten key questions associated with the practice of public participation (Table 3). While other manuals recite observations or dictate formal principles, these authors encourage reflection by putting the reader in the shoes of the practitioner. How would you handle competing ethical principles? How long is too long for a process to persist? Although the text accompanying these queries fails to take advantage of the existing literature, merely confronting these questions is valuable.

*Table 3. Underlying Issues in Public Participation (Source: English et al.; 1995)*

- What is the goal of the participation process?
- Who counts as an affected party?
- Who should participate in the process?
- Where should participation occur in the decision-making process?
- What should be the roles and responsibilities of the participants?
- How to handle competing ethical principles?
- How to balance technical and value issues?
- How much influence on the decision should the process have?
- How long should the process last?
- How should the process relate to other decision making activities?

An extensive list of criteria for good public participation is also presented (Table 4). It is unfortunate, however, that these do not flow logically out of the key questions which precede them. Nor is there any attempt to justify or explain the reasoning behind the criteria. They are merely presented "out of the blue" in a three and one-half page "chapter." These criteria are further sorted into "practical" and "ethical" types. No reason is stated for why this is done, nor is it obvious what purpose there is to doing so.

According to the formula of handbooks—observations,

Table 4. Criteria for Public Participation  
(Source: English et al; 1993)

### Practical Criteria

*The mechanism should not...*

- Require a great deal of participant time.
- Go on for more than one year.
- Be expensive.
- Take place in only one setting, nor should it be a formal setting.
- Require sophisticated communication or analytic skills of participants.
- Require a high degree of prior knowledge.
- Have participants appointed by the agency.
- Involve only a small number of participants.
- Be inflexible.
- Be able to serve multiple uses.
- Work only under ideal circumstances.
- Be valid in only one setting.

### Ethical Criteria

*The mechanism should:*

- Incorporate all legitimate stakeholder\* views.
- Be unbiased with regard to participants or outcomes.
- Make public the roles of those initiating, managing, and participating.
- Keep other information confidential.
- Be easily explainable to the public at large.
- Make certain that promises made are clearly stated at the start.
- Not produce arbitrary and capricious outcomes, but should produce results that can be replicated.

criteria, techniques, performance evaluations—descriptions of the techniques follow the evaluative criteria in this manual. Each technique is described according to the following outline: Goal, Participant Selection, Scope, Roles of Participants and Others, Duration, Use of Outcomes, Decision Approach, Appropriate Phases (when used in the typical decision making process), Key Strengths, and Key Weaknesses. With only a page or two for each technique, and no clues as to where an interested reader could learn more, these descriptions have limited value.

This report differs from others in that each technique is not evaluated on the 20 criteria that they list as most salient to implementing public participation. Such an evaluation is unjustified, the authors argue, because the performance of each mechanism depends to a large extent on how it is implemented

(ibid., 50). Instead, they characterize each technique on the following features: participant selection, participant commitment in terms of time and emotion, scope of issues in terms of breadth and type, need for external management, typical duration, use of outcomes, and the decision approach.

A final chapter listing recommendations rounds out the document. These are presented without tying them back to the criteria, the context, or the techniques. Perhaps the recommendations are appropriate for some readers, but most people familiar with the field will find them obvious (e.g., public-participation processes should have ground rules and flexibility). Other recommendations indicate a surprising amount of *naïveté*: “The initial identification of possible stakeholders should be done by a neutral outside party.”

In summary, this report’s strength is its list of key questions associated with the implementation of public-participation processes. While the argument that techniques cannot be evaluated generically—because they can be performed in such varied ways—carries some weight, it does not explain why the authors do not, instead, attempt to identify the contextual factors that influence performance. Without some idea of how a technique will perform, what basis can there be for advising a decision-making body to use one technique over another?

## Two Guiding Principles: Realism and Empowerment

None of these handbooks takes the *naïve* view that public participation can create consensual decisions that are efficient and result in win-win solutions for all participants every time. However, all three are oriented around minimizing disputes by creating a decision collaboratively with potentially affected interests. And all assert that consensus should be pursued as a matter of principle. And, although consensus ought to be pursued, they also recognize that, much of the time consensus will be unobtainable. At some point in the process, it is very likely that an unpopular decision will have to be made, or else the decision making will grind to a halt. In the broader context of the philosophy of liberal democracy, Barber calls this *realism*, and cites it as one of the three basic features of liberal democracy (1984).

*Realism* means accepting the basic fact that, since everyone is not likely to agree in a reasonable amount of time, someone will have to make a decision. It is important to point out that the chosen person need not be a government official. There are an infinite number of creative ways to endow an individual, or a group of individuals, with authentic—if strictly limited—decision-making authority. In the National Research Council’s recent report entitled *Understanding Risk*, this was discussed as the closure problem (NRC 1996, 129-131). Neither closure nor realism is explicitly addressed in any of the three handbooks, but the theme of realism is carried under the surface of the writings.

For instance, the EBRD manual suggests that the decision be carefully and thoroughly justified to the participants. It is important to review how the publics were involved and how

the decision maker used their input to make the final decision. The manual recommends the practice that one sees in the better Environmental Impact Statements—a reconstruction of the views and opinions along side of a discussion of how these inputs were used in the making of the decision. Especially important are explanations and reasoning for why the decision differed from the positions of the participants (ERM 1995, 20).

English et al. invoke the realist clause often. For example, they leave a great deal of the decision-making authority in the hands of the federal agency. Statements such as this indicate how the authors see power as being exercised in the process:

And whether the recommendations are binding on the initiating agency or are simply regarded as 'advice' or 'input' will depend both on the agency's legal ability to shift some of its decision making authority and on its willingness to do so. (English et al. 1993, 39)

Closure can be achieved by power (the realist solution), but it can also be achieved more democratically. One example is the establishment of deadlines or milestones. If the deadline is established via a democratic process, participants would, in a sense, be bound by their own word to comply. Closure would then be realized by each individual acting out his or her free will in accord with personal commitment, as opposed to being forced to comply by an outside force. Recently, the Northern Forest Lands Council in New England used this approach successfully. They began with a clearly defined sunset clause, which never wavered. From the very first day they began, they knew that they would issue their recommendations in September 1994, at which point the Council would cease to exist. This strategy forced consensus on the final text of recommendations, because people had invested too much in the process to allow it to fail at the eleventh hour (Webler 1996).

None of the handbooks recommends deadlines, but English et al. do ask the question: "How long should the process go on?" And they advise planners to draw up a clear timetable, equipped with milestones and a clear final endpoint (English et al. 1993, 41). Again, here the authors clearly envision planners who have the power to make conclusive decisions. A planning approach such as this—to the extent that it is feasible—may indeed be successful at limiting the escalation of conflict that sometimes accompanies public participation. It also pinpoints just where interjections could occur. Such an approach may be good and appropriate, but it is more realistic than it is democratic.

Realism is one of the guiding principles central to all of these handbooks; empowerment is the other. Just how empowerment is understood in these writings is quite a bit more sophisticated than that imagined by Arnstein in her ladder of participation (1969).<sup>6</sup> Arnstein suggested empowerment was a black or white issue. Either the citizens had the power or the government had it. Throughout these handbooks the emphasis is on more than simply finding the appropriate balance of power. They realize that taking decision-making authority away from the federal agencies and giving it to a self-selective group of individuals may not be in the best interest of all. At

the same time, these handbooks intend to reconstruct power relations.

Empowerment in the context of these texts does not mean guaranteeing direct influence over the content of the final decision. Still, it is clear that any participation that prohibits the decision-making body from learning from the participants is insincere. The point is that no participant should assume he or she has a right to determine actual aspects of the final decision. For these texts, empowerment means, above all else, influence in shaping the scope and content of the decision-making process (instead of the outcome). It is widely appreciated that even the best process cannot guarantee that people will be happy with the outcomes. However, these manuals ascribe to the general belief that, if people buy into and accept ownership of the process, they are more likely to tolerate the results of that process.<sup>7</sup>

*Empowerment* in the process design means open participation. In other words, any individual or group that *feels* itself potentially affected should be able to participate on par with all the other parties. Obviously, there are logistical nightmares associated with this idea and the real possibility that some may misuse the opportunity to intentionally stall a project. It is interesting to examine how the different handbooks deal with this problem.

Bleiker and Bleiker deal with this possibility by explicitly offering all parties a role in the process. They suggest building a process with a reputation as being inclusive and responsive. That way, if a party refuses to participate and then tries to bad-mouth the process, it will lose its credibility in the public eye (1995, iii-15). The EBRD manual suggests using a neutral party to interview potential participants. This group would base its decision on whom to include partly on an assessment of the group's attitude toward the process. If they are perceived as troublemakers, they would not be invited (ERM 1995, 18). English et al. suggest that, because a self-selection approach to determining participants can actually exaggerate problems of bias and manipulation, more structured approaches are preferable (English et al. 1993, 34). Specifically, they mention selecting participants based either on their beliefs (attitudes or beliefs related to the issue) or on other demographic characteristics (race, occupation, place of residence, etc.).

Through concrete suggestions such as these, and through the arguments and justifications given for conducting an open and sincere public involvement program, these manuals contribute toward realizing aspects of strong democracy. None of the selections is unaware of the complications associated with making these changes, which perhaps explains why the texts wax and wane between realist and minimalist dispositions.

### Criteria for Evaluating Effectiveness

Realism and empowerment are fundamental principles that relate to the challenge of increasing the role of direct forms of democracy within a liberal democratic culture. Each of

these three manuals also emphasizes a slightly different array of operational principles meant to further public participation. As already noted, the Bleikers' main principles for public participation are to be effective, responsible, and responsive. The EBRD manual calls for fair opportunity for all individuals and groups to learn about the project and to have one's views heard. It also emphasizes responsiveness: "It is vitally important to demonstrate how the information gathered from the public participation was used or was not used" (ERM 1995,12). For the most part, English et al. advocate that agency officials take an enlightened view of citizen input. However, they too put forth one strong normative principle: that of normative consensus, i.e., pursuing the common good as opposed to what is good for "me" (English et al. 1993, vi, 18-21).

These differences are important, because they color the perception of how well different public-participation techniques perform. As I have explained above, one thing many manuals do is to describe a number of participation techniques and then rate each one on a number of criteria. The idea is that evaluative criteria should anticipate a technique's performance on certain principles. If we assert that the process should be fair, then we would look for indicators of fairness, and so on.<sup>8</sup> Unfortunately, because each handbook conceptualizes the normative criteria for public participation so differently, it is impossible to compare their evaluations of the different approaches. A great shortcoming of these three manuals is the absence of justification for how the actual evaluations of participation techniques is related to principles or criteria. The EBRD manual does not even list criteria, but simply presents evaluations out of the blue. The report by English et al. is similar in this regard. After a good discussion of principles, they jump to a list of criteria, presenting no connection between the two. Even though the Bleikers provide extensive evaluations, it is not easy to follow the reasoning used, partly because the criteria are never clearly stated or operationalized.

English and colleagues raise a very interesting point in their refusal to use the criteria to evaluate techniques in a generic sense. This is invalid, they argue, because the specifics of the application determine performance more than does the characteristics of the technique itself. This point was echoed in the NRC Report.

Deliberative methods are merely tools. Results will depend less on the tool and more on its users and the setting in which it is used.[...] The history of an issue, level of conflict, scientific data, and existing power dynamics may also influence outcome as much as the method. (NRC 1996, 96)

Bleiker and Bleiker, on the other hand, do perform evaluations of each technique (their evaluations are much too complicated to present here). At the same time, however, they confirm the assertion about not evaluating models in the generic sense. The Bleikers get to have their cake and eat it too by calling their evaluations "preliminary." Final evaluations need to be made by the participation organizer who has become familiar with the nuances of the specific context and history as well as the nature of the techniques.

None of the manuals, however, had any difficulty with providing some basic descriptive summary information about each technique. Table 5 summarizes the evaluation measures each manual used.

For the most part, these items are purely descriptive (as opposed to normative). Whether a process is appropriate for a large or small group has to do with the property of the process, namely the form of dialogue expected to occur. These descriptive aspects are good for the planner to know, but they are rather less interesting than normative evaluations. What is interesting about Table 5 is that there is almost no agreement among the three handbooks on which descriptive features of the process are relevant. Not even cost was common to all three handbooks. Nor are the criteria accompanied by any indicators. Again, evaluations of each technique for participa-

Table 5. Criteria for Evaluating Models of Public Participation

<b>Bleiker and Bleiker</b>	<b>ERM</b>	<b>English et al.</b>
\$ Costs	Size of audience	Appropriate phase in the decision-making process
Time demands	Type of audience	Participant selection method
Other costs	Technical content	Participant commitment time
Risk	Skill level required of institution	Participant commitment emotion
Difficulty	Cost	Scope of issues (breadth and type)
Flexibility and adaptability		Need for external management
Creation of Record		Typical duration
Limits of written communication		Use of outcomes
Limits of meetings		Decision approach

tion are made on these criteria without any explanation—and this holds true for all three handbooks.

Constructing a sound theoretical argument for criteria and indicators of good public participation has been a matter of some interest in the field as of late. Two distinct approaches prevail at the moment. They are by no means mutually exclusive. Both start from a different theoretical tradition and deduce criteria and indicators to measure performance. The first draws upon political theories of democracy to identify fundamental principles for public participation. This would include the work of Laird (1993) and Fiorino (1990)—both of whom derived criteria and evaluated generic techniques of participation—as well as an earlier conceptual piece by Rosenbaum (1978). The second approach begins with social theory, more precisely, Habermas's theory of universal pragmatics (1979), which is an interactionist theory of society. My own work would fall into this category (Webler 1995) as would that of Renn (1992); Dietz (1987); Forester (1985, 1993); Kemp (1985); and Fischer (1985, 1990). Recently, twenty practitioners and theorists within the field took part in a project to evaluate eight generic models for public participation using the discursive standard criteria, which were derived from Habermas's concept of an ideal speech situation (Renn, Webler, and Wiedemann 1995). My intent in recapping these new works is to provide a measure for critiquing the handbooks discussed here and to raise expectations for future handbooks and guidebooks that evaluate public-participation techniques.

### **Toward a Science of Public Participation**

The field of public participation is rich with experiential knowledge and telling anecdotes. At the same time, it suffers from a chronic deficit of systematic and theoretical knowledge. There are scores of claims that are backed up only by an appeal to authority. Empirical evidence is very sketchy.

For example, Bleiker and Bleiker assert in Principle #7: "If the public perceives the decision making process of a project to be 'fair,' it is willing to live with a project that impacts different interests un-equally."<sup>9</sup> Many people find this a very, very strong claim. Is it warranted? In the interest of furthering the practice of public participation, we need to be extremely careful about making statements that cannot be backed up with evidence (be it systematic or experiential). The statement sounds reasonable, but what evidence can we offer a skeptic? I know of no place in the literature of public participation where this hypothesis has been empirically tested and substantiated. Without such evidence, these claims lack the power they need to be compelling and they run the risk of becoming dogma instead of good science.

In another example, the EBRD Manual states that, "Public participation significantly reduces the likelihood of litigation." Again, this is another "fact" that most of us in the field would like to believe is true, and one that makes intuitive sense to us, but what evidence is there? Again, no citations of empirical or experiential testing of this claim are provided. If they exist, the

handbook would make a more powerful case by citing such studies. The ERBD manual does not bother to support that claim or the following: "Early public participation decreases the overall planning time, decreases the likelihood of costly changes in later phases, and often leads to 'better' projects with fewer unforeseen costs." Again, all claims that would help make a compelling case for public participation, were they backed up with evidence.

These claims may be true, but to date we do not have the scientific evidence we need to convince the skeptics. This is a very serious weakness for the field. The handbooks reviewed here, and many others as well, are written to answer a need for systematic advice about how to do public participation well. While it is appropriate to base advice on the experience of seasoned practitioners (as these three handbooks do), that is not enough. The short analysis here has demonstrated that there are substantial differences of opinion about how to put public participation into practice. The key to ensuring that the field of public participation continues to progress so that it can answer society's need for "how-to" advice is to systematize our knowledge base. This can only be done by treating public participation as a science and allocating research efforts to the study of the field, advice already put forth by the National Research Council:

Although formal techniques of risk analysis have evolved tremendously over the past 20 years, research on deliberative methods has received far less attention. Government agencies that have experience with deliberative processes usually do little to document and evaluate them, in spite of the expressed need for evaluation results and for advice based on experience. ... Thus, much less is known about how to select deliberative methods and to use them effectively in particular situations than about how to select and use analytical methods. (NRC 1996, 86)

A science of public participation will always have to leave room for the experiential knowledge that handbooks such as these expound, but it also stands to gain much from treating public participation as a topic of scientific inquiry.

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### **Endnotes**

1. To those who do not, I would point them to the heavily trodden ground surrounding the debates between liberal and participatory democratic theories.

2. In the interest of full-disclosure, the author points out that he participated in a workshop at the early stage of the project which produced this manual.
3. Connor advances this approach as well (1992).
4. I am equating the terms "public participation" with "stakeholder involvement" here. According to the definition used in this manual, stakeholders are any individuals or groups with an interest that is potentially impacted by the proposed activity. Elsewhere in the literature "stakeholders" refers only to those organized interest groups that typically participate in politics.
5. The authors' vision of just what "normative consensus" means is unusual. Indeed, they interpret "normative consensus" as something in which, "consensus should not be the sole aim." They state that it does not preclude "continued competition among divergent, passionately-held points of view." It also does not reject bargaining. This leaves the concept very far from most ideas of consensus and close to the reality of pluralism, which the authors whole-heartedly endorse. "Pluralist democracy [...] is inevitable and appropriate..." (p. 21). At the same time they speak of realizing the normative consensus as described by Rousseau, which, in the light of their endorsement of pluralism, makes for a curious statement.
6. One of the best known articles in the field of citizen participation is Arnstein's "Ladder of Participation" from the *Journal of the American Planning Association* (1969). Arnstein's point was that it was possible to distinguish between different formats of citizen participation according to the degree to which the publics were empowered in the process. At the low end, publics were not empowered, but were merely manipulated by the decision-making body. Half way up the ladder, the publics are being taken seriously, but still play a purely advisory role. At the top of the ladder, the public is fully empowered because they now have become the decision makers.
7. I would point out, however, that that belief has not been verified empirically.
8. I conceptualize principles, criteria, and indicators as follows. Principles are general statements of basic beliefs. These can be conceptually complex. Criteria are specific belief aspects in principles. Indicators are empirical measures that allow us to evaluate performance.
9. Contrary to the language, the Bleikers do not perceive of "the public" as a unitary body with one homogeneous view.

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