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4 ASSESSING PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT EFFECTIVENESS IN LONG-TERM
5 PLANNING
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13 Angel APARICIO
14 Centre for Studies and Experimentation of Public Works (CEDEX), Ministry of Transportation, Spain
15 Alfonso XII, 3
16 E-28014 Madrid (Spain)
17 Tel: +34 913 35 7487
18 Email: Angel.Aparicio@cedex.es
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4 **ABSTRACT**

5 The recent experience of the Spanish Ministry of Transportation in developing a new Transportation Plan, intended
6 to use public involvement as a key element to recover legitimacy for long-term planning and to gain support to
7 sustainable transportation objectives.

8 The public involvement procedure reinforced the role of planning but, ironically, also resulted in a more
9 conservative document in terms of the relevance of environmental goals and the emphasis on management vs.
10 infrastructure development policies. Conservationist groups were particularly disappointed about the outcome of the
11 process.

12 Although there was a strong emphasis in creating multiple, well-balanced panels for discussion, consensus-
13 building lacked of time to reinforce the position of more progressive approaches compared to "business as usual"
14 positions. Furthermore, key environmental questions proved to be impossible to be carefully examined at this stage,
15 and were postponed to modal plans.

16 Overall, the process served to legitimate and reinforce long-term planning as a useful tool for transportation
17 policy development. However, there is a significant way ahead for making public involvement more influential.
18 Linking goals to clearly specified and regularly monitored objectives would keep public involvement alive along the
19 planning cycle. A more clear link between general transportation policy goals and stakeholders' daily interests, such
20 as quality of service, environmental quality or access to development opportunities should keep alive and improve
21 the dialog among technicians, decision makers and the public, and put additional pressure in the transportation
22 sector to gather further evidence and develop a better understanding about these complex links.
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A FRAMEWORK FOR ASSESMENT OF PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT IN A LONG-RANGE PLAN

Public involvement in long-range planning has been a key issue for many decades. Compared to US experience, public involvement in European transportation planning has heavily relied on the development of environmental legislation. Landmarks in this process have been Council Directive 85/377/EEC of 27 June 1985 on the assessment of the effects of certain public and private projects on the environment, Directive 2001/42/EC on the Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA) of Plans and Programmes, and Directive 2003/35/EC, of 26 May 2003 providing for public participation in respect of the drawing up of certain plans and programs relating to the environment, which implements in the EU the International Convention on Access to Environmental Information, Public Participation in Environmental Decision-making and Access to Justice (The Aarhus Convention).

This maybe understood as a consequence of the lack of priority given to public involvement by European transportation administrations. For example, Booth and Richardson (1), referring mainly to the United Kingdom, state that transportation planning has merely incorporated new participative techniques tricking from other public policy areas, but has never been proactive in developing new planning paradigms.

Probably, problems and tensions regarding public involvement in European transport plans reflect a wider problem: the absence of a coherent framework for strategic transport planning in many countries (1). Major gaps are the absence of relations with other public policies, mainly spatial planning, and the lack of adequate links among modes.

Strategic planning seems elitist, and it is difficult to get the wider public involved: there seems to be some reluctance in transport professionals and policy makers alike to accept that they can get any significant contribution from the general public.

SEA regulations and practice are crucial to create an effective hierarchy of assessment, and at focusing public involvement at the adequate level, thus making it more effective and influential. There is, however, a real risk of developing SEA as a highly sophisticated process, and to avoid the fundamental questions (e.g. whether transport demand has inevitably to continue current expansion): the general public would be kept outside discussions aimed at specialist. *“The democratic deficit which has characterized strategic transport planning for many years has not yet been repaired. Weaknesses exist in old and new methods, exclusionary practices are being reinforced, and strategies of participation remain top-down.”*(1).

Attempts to create solid SEA methodologies in Europe have not been successful yet. The development of SEA has focused on identifying adequate information sources, rather than in promoting public involvement. This is for example the focus of the European Commission’s Expert Group of Transport and Environment report on the improvement of the European Transport and Environment Reporting Mechanism (TERM) (2) or the recent scope of the European Council of Ministers of Transport (ECMT) initiatives to promote SEA in the continent(3). The recently issued “BEACOM Manual” (4) is probably more adequate for particular schemes than for strategic, long-term plans. Furthermore, the manual gives a disproportionate focus to technical analytical instruments than to public participation.

Booth and Richardson propose a framework of 5 key questions to define public involvement in transport:

- The rationale for involvement (why involve the public?).
- The substantive issues (what is negotiable?).
- The design of strategies, methods and techniques (How will the public be involved?).
- Identifying stakeholders (who should be involved?).
- The point at which people should be involved.

According to these authors, any assessment of public involvement processes should focus on the empowerment of the process itself. A public involvement process could be characterized by 3 critical factors:

- inclusion or exclusion of the public or publics;
- the timing of public involvement in the process;
- The boundaries of debate.

Public involvement would be successful in enhancing planning if it could favor the inclusion of new ideas and knowledge, increase the range of options, test evidence and positions and address uncertainty and conflict. This vision of planning outcome quality is quite different from the traditional agency’s viewpoint (being successful at convincing people about the merits of the initial proposal).

A similar approach is supported by Szyliowicz (5). According to (1) and (5) public involvement in transportation has to be seen from the broader perspective of governance reform. Three important questions for assessment of the process would be: (a) the degree to which it promotes democratic processes, (b) yields decisions of technical merit, and (c) accords legitimacy to the outcome.

3 In short, it could be concluded that three different, complementary perspectives are available for public
4 involvement assessment: (a) the consensus of the output (the final plan) with the Spanish Ministry of Transportation
5 (*Ministerio de Fomento*, MoT) initial thoughts; (b) the quality of the participation process itself. (c) The
6 improvement in quality of transportation policies: minimizing conflict, enhancing the quality of transportation
7 decisions, and restoring the public's trust in government institutions. As agencies progressively move from the first
8 to the third, governance reform is probably moving higher in their priorities, and prospects for sustainable
9 transportation policies will probably be improving.

10 **THE PEIT EXPERIENCE: PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT MECHANISMS AT WORK**

11 **Public Involvement and Decision Making in Europe and in Spain**

12 Both, public involvement and strategic long-term planning have a wide degree of variety in European
13 countries, depending on questions such as legal framework, governance traditions, and planning culture. A recent
14 study sponsored by the European Commission (6) underlined these differences, based on an in-depth survey
15 conducted in eight European countries. It found a "wide variety in the practice of decision-making in the countries
16 investigated", but some elements may help to characterize the situation in Spain and, therefore, the environment in
17 which the Strategic Infrastructure and Transport Plan (PEIT) was developed (multiple answers were possible in the
18 survey):

- 19 • Spain shows in this survey the lowest profile for strategic planning. The number of strategic plans
20 identified in the survey is the lowest in the panel, and the main cited reason to initiate a decision-making procedure
21 for a project is that it is "politically required" (80%). "User demand" is mentioned only in 20% of the responses.
- 22 • At the question "who is responsible or which groups are involved in the decision?" public participation
23 seems not to have much weight in any country: answers range from 13% in the UK to 0% in some countries, with a
24 5% in Spain.
- 25 • Analyzing the participation of the public, the survey shows that it overwhelmingly responds to strict
26 legally prescribed participation (68%), whereas more sophisticated, opened ways of participation (referred to as "a
27 priori planned" in the survey is low in Spain (25%).

28 The barriers encountered in the decision-making process were also analyzed in this study. It was
29 encountered that processes in Spain (probably due to the dominance of large infrastructure projects compared to
30 planning or soft measures) are commonly solved by "forcing a solution" (22% of cases, much higher than in any
31 other country), and that managerial barriers are reported as not serious, probably due to the limited public
32 participation, according to the authors of the study.

31 **PEIT as a turning point**

32 With the new Strategic Infrastructures and Transport Plan (Plan Estratégico de Infraestructuras y
33 Transporte, or PEIT) (7), the Spanish Ministry of Transport was intending to recover long-term planning as "the tool
34 by which to frame its medium-term actions, and to take on a public commitment in the pursuit of the policies for
35 which it is responsible". Planning should, inter alia, be able to facilitate "Transparent decision-making, widening the
36 involvement in the process not just of the social-professional and financial sectors directly involved, but of the
37 whole of society. Planning is a characteristic of a system of governance based on participation and the willingness of
38 those responsible for public policies to account for their decisions and the results of such decisions to citizens". (7)

39 The MoT initially proposed a number of general objectives to guide to whole planning process. Those
40 objectives were specified in terms of the quality of the conditions of mobility set for sustainable development, as
41 established in a Council of Ministers Resolution, dated July 16, 2004, which officially launched the process. The
42 PEIT are structured in four fields: system efficiency, social and territorial cohesion, environmental compatibility and
43 economic development.

44 This approach tried to curve an increasing trend to replace long-term, formal planning by short-term
45 programming of infrastructure development investment. The new approach was justified under the grounds of
46 improving efficiency in public investment, increasing transparency in decision-making, and allowing the
47 development of strategies to decrease global and local environmental impacts of transportation activity.

48 The purpose of PEIT is to progressively move the Spanish transportation system towards sustainable
49 trends, after many years of impressive demand growth and infrastructure development. The forecast and provide
50 approach was replaced by a "back casting exercise", in which a desirable, sustainable 2020 vision was developed,
51 and alternative strategies to achieve that scenario- with different speed in convergence towards sustainability were
52 developed.

The MoT faced a paradoxical situation towards public involvement. On the one hand, it was thought to be highly necessary for the MoT to develop a wide consensus in the “need for change” and in finding the right “path towards sustainability”. On the other hand, the dominating culture (particularly among key stakeholders such as regional governments and transportation lobbies, which would be leading any public involvement process) kept many actors focused on short-term investment programming. Last, but not least, the legal and cultural framework was not particularly prone to public involvement, thus making it difficult to put in place a coherent approach within the tightly timing established for the development of the new Plan.

The MoT adopted an incremental, pragmatic approach:

- Developing and reinforcing a new hierarchy of plans, from the Strategic plan down to modal plans, corridor analysis and project definition, in parallel to the European system of environmental assessment. The new system included provisions for monitoring and revision. This should facilitate the involvement of a wider range of stakeholders, as planning moves down to more concrete questions. The general procedure was announced while launching the process and publishing the MoT’s initial goals.
- Encouraging a more participatory environment, mainly by developing new mechanisms of information and monitoring to consolidate public involvement, transparency and accountability.
- Focusing at this stage in the participation of stakeholders with a higher interest in long-term, strategic topics, while keeping information of on-going discussions and interim documents available to the general public.

Public involvement mechanisms used by PEIT

The main mechanisms used for public involvement by the MoT included:

- Discussion of key transportation challenges (as identified by the technical MoT services in an initial document of diagnosis) within focus groups. The discussion was structured in two sessions: a session with the attendance of a balanced representation of the various stakeholders (including foreign experts in each particular field), and an open session hosted by leading transportation Universities in the country. The selected discussion themes included environmental goals in transportation, landscape and spatial development, economic development and transportation; development of intermodal systems for passengers and freight; sustainable urban mobility, and pricing. This procedure ended with a general meeting, with some 200 participants representing a wide array of stakeholders and interest.
- Frequent contacts with the media, presenting and justifying the planning approach, including a half day meeting of the technical team with a wide audience of journalists.
- Bilateral meetings with the nineteen regional transportation administrations in the country followed by a general discussion when the draft document was completed, before launching it for public enquiry.
- Internal consensus-building within the MoT- trying to conciliate modal approaches by creating a technical steering committee, which met several times - and with other Ministries- notably the Ministry of Environment-, to adapt the procedure to the SEA Directive guidelines.
- Formal consultation – initially for two months, finally reopened to include all the comments received. The formal consultation, although legally limited to those aspects included in the SEA Directive, was opened to any other relevant aspects. Comments were submitted to extensive analysis, to give input to the final version of the plan.

Contents and Results of Public Involvement Efforts

The public involvement strategy faced significant constraints, including lack of previous experience, limited financial resources, and rigid and short deadlines. In particular, it was clear that the identification of particular social needs was not extensive enough to guarantee an adequate integration of social equity concerns within the national transportation policy. Furthermore, early involvement and effective participation of stakeholders was biased in favor of transportation and academic elites due to the channels chosen for dissemination, the structure and format of the panels, and the contents of the documents. Finally, consensus building, although intensive, was penalized and conditioned by a tight and rigid schedule for the approval process, and was probably critical in the opposition of some stakeholders (mainly conservationist groups) to key aspects of the plan.

In spite of these and other constraints, public involvement efforts succeeded in giving key contributions to the plan’s contents, increase its legitimacy, and recover long-term planning as a key element of transport policy. For example, the different meetings and workshops offered an interesting- although difficult to manage- mix of consensus about the need for a new paradigm based on sustainable principles, coupled with skepticism about the viability of attaining long-term radical change. In this sense:

- The different meetings and workshops, although dominated by highly technical discussions, showed an overwhelming consensus in the need to radically remake the transport policy paradigm, replacing the focus from

infrastructure investments (and how to finance growing needs) to a balanced pack of reform of existing regulations, demand management measures and focused investments to make intermodality work in practice. That consensus also included the controversial point of making national government more visible in local transport policies.

- The consensus also extended to reckon that the new paradigm is extremely difficult to put into practiced, even if it counts with broad support. The route towards sustainable transportation, as proposed by the Plan, was lacking precision and was- maybe consciously- hiding the most crucial points to the public.

- The new paradigm had to fight the suspicions of relevant stakeholders, which wanted those infrastructure investments promised in previous MoT programs to be implemented. Furthermore, most of those stakeholders keep striving for increasing infrastructure investment levels in their regions or interest areas.

The formal SEA consultation process should have offered an opportunity to reinforce the weight of environmental goals in the process. However, this was the first time that SEA of a strategic national transport plan was carried out in Europe, and the lack of experience proved to be a major shortfall. The quality and acceptability of the environmental report was handicapped by limited data and resources, continuous shortcuts to cope with the deadlines, and, most decisively, by the lack of proven methodologies (4). Furthermore, too high expectations on the new procedure from many stakeholders, made it difficult to reach consensus on the scope, contents and conclusions of the SEA report. Nevertheless, even if contested particularly by some relevant conservationist groups, this report gave some valuable contributions to the final version of the Plan, including the need to carry out some additional analysis and to reinforce the environmental monitoring system proposed in the plan.

The public consultation of both, the plan and its SEA report, mobilized more than 3,000 responses, although they could be grouped in a little more than 200 different contributions and views, as some responses were endorsed by many groups and individuals. Most of these claims referred to the need for additional (or anticipated) infrastructure provision in particular areas of the country, responding to a natural reaction towards the “need for change” and the “turn towards greener transportation” associated to the plan. (8).

The number of contributions referring to basic considerations about the transportation planning process, the objectives and the purpose of strategic planning was not negligible. There were many requests for further clarification and more solid compromise to improve and make public involvement more effective in future. The coherence of the process conducted was challenged, although generally in a positive way, asking to give more consideration and further analysis to many questions in future planning exercises, within the planning hierarchy newly adopted. Existing transportation regulations and the plan’s proposals for reform were also actively discussed, particularly in terms of decentralization vs. re-centralization, deregulation vs. expansion of public involvement, and the role of transportation operators under the proposed intermodal system.

The contents of the communications varied widely, from global, integrated analysis to quasi-parochial concerns; from radical critics to minor suggestions and from sectoral concerns to ideological discussion. These varied comments were organized following the plan’s structure, and were subsequently assessed, balanced and partially incorporated to the document in a way, which probably gave a major relevance to territorial balance (avoid frontal critics from any region) and wide acceptance compared to give further coherence to the document and fill the gaps identified by the critics (8).

Globally, this process showed that the whole decision-making procedure was probably not clear for a significant part of the participants, although it had been announced at the beginning. Likely communication gaps from the MoT were probably reinforced by the lack of precedents in public involvement for a strategic plan, the lack of experience in the implementation of the SEA Directive and the confusion about the level of definition adequate for strategic planning at the national level. Consensus building suffered from reduced time and resources, which make it difficult to disseminate contributions and encourage feedback. The continuation of the process at the subsequent planning levels is currently being handicapped by the slow path of reform within MoT technical services.

A STRUCTURED ASSESMENT

The impact of the public involvement effort in the planning process can be assessed from different perspectives: (a) the consensus of the output (the final plan) with the MoT initial thoughts (probably, the MoT’s primary focus); (b) the quality of the participation process itself. (c) The improvement in quality of transportation policies: minimizing conflict, enhancing the quality of transportation decisions, and restoring the public’s trust in government institutions. As agencies progressively move from the first to the third, governance reform is probably moving higher in their priorities, and prospects for sustainable transportation policies will probably be improving.

The assessment from the MoT’s focus is probably positive in this case. Although the plan had an innovative and radical approach to national transportation policy, in a context where quite relevant stakeholders were primarily interested in keeping and increasing infrastructure investments within a “business as usual” policy,

3 the procedure was successful in integrating these stakeholders in the general consensus without giving up to the
4 plan's long-term goals and objectives. Opposition from those stakeholders in favor of a more radical approach were
5 appeased by reinforcing the monitoring and participation mechanisms in future and promising regular updates of the
6 plan, thus making any long term infrastructure investment provisional and subject to further scrutiny. Furthermore,
7 there was a broad support to the proposals on governance reform in the transportation sector, including acceptance
8 (with decreasing reluctance as the process proceeded) of the need for long-term planning.

9 Compared to the initial proposal, public involvement probably led to a more conventional planning
10 document than initially expected, reinforcing the attention of the plan to traditional infrastructure programming and
11 financing needs, increasing short-term building promises and financial needs and postponing the most controversial
12 management measures, such as pricing. Regional and local governments, as well as many institutional stakeholders
13 successfully lobbied during the public consultation process in this direction, thus slowing down the "path for
14 change", which was however maintained in the long-run.

15 The quality of the public involvement process was probably far from perfect. Traditional stakeholders,
16 including regional and local governments, public agencies, transportation and construction enterprises or Unions
17 successfully used the new opened possibilities to further lobby for their traditional agendas. However, the field was
18 opened to a number of newcomers, which thus far had seen the MoT as an extremely opaque and closed
19 Government Department. The procedure itself, the resources dedicated and the lack of previous experiences partially
20 explain why the process failed to gather input from social groups with special interests. The lack of in-depth analysis
21 on the social inclusion dimensions linked to transportation policies probably further discouraged these groups from
22 participating, and weakened the claims of the plan to make of social cohesion a key transportation goal. Although
23 these groups are probably too far from strategic planning concerns, and would be better contacted at more detailed
24 planning or at the project level, it was obvious that there was no strategy to address them at any stage, to the point
25 that they were not even identified as such "social groups". At this stage, the public involvement procedure showed
26 that the cohesion goal was perceived as more urgent at the spatial level (i.e. concealing and balancing the claims
27 from the different regions) than at the social one.

28 According to their contributions, the main concerns of traditional stakeholders referred to additional
29 investments in their areas of interest (spatial or modal), to slow down and accommodate the (otherwise accepted in
30 their final goals) path of change to their own interests; to discuss the role of the different transportation modes in
31 future, and to try to secure the financial viability of the plan. From this point of view, these contributions did not
32 differ dramatically from those that these actors would have lobbied for under the former, non-participatory MoT's
33 policy.

34 Limitations in terms of resources, expertise and time, were probably decisive to explain why consensus
35 could not reach many significant stakeholders in favor of more radical changes, and why the initially more
36 ambitious goals of the MoT could not be maintained.

37 The third and final perspective for assessment refers to the improvement of governance in the
38 transportation sector due to public involvement efforts. The relatively important degree of participation at the
39 different public involvement mechanisms, and the general claims to keep and reinforce participation during the
40 whole planning cycle have probably reinforced both, the planning system for national transportation policy, and the
41 concerns to cope with the obvious weaknesses in terms of quality and resources devoted to public involvement in
42 transportation. Accordingly, further progress in both directions should be expected as the planning cycle progresses
43 and, particularly, as the PEIT monitoring system is developed and its first results are published.

44 The scene was dominated by traditional stakeholders, and the playing field probably remains strongly
45 unlevelled, but key disadvantaged social groups are probably more aware now about the potential of transportation
46 policies, and the strong support received from many sides to get the MoT more involved at the local level- where the
47 social impacts of transportation are probably more significant- should further increase the MoT concerns about
48 social cohesion and the participation of these groups.

49 Although the public's trust in the MoT was not at stake initially, it was obvious that it was perceived as a
50 highly technical organization, skipping dialog with outsiders or no-technical correspondents, unconcerned with other
51 perspectives and with innovation, and with unclear decision-making procedures. The process has not radically
52 transformed this image, but it has made the MoT more transparent and accountable, even though the general public
remains largely far from being interested in transportation policies.

Although decision making processes are being clarified within the MoT, internal reform is making only
slow progress, thus jeopardizing a more extensive use of public involvement mechanisms in the forthcoming
planning and project exercises, throwing away a part of the opportunities raised by the initial effort.

Environmental legislation remains the sole formal legal reason to make progress in public involvement, and
it remains being perceived as a "barrier" by a significant- although decreasing- number of transportation

practitioners. Any other participation opportunities are considered as voluntarily or “graciously” given by the MoT. The need to pass specific legal obligations on transportation planning and public involvement is not perceived as a priority. Although opposition within the MoT to participation has considerably decreased, the lack of formal regulations weakens and slows down the reform process in the sector.

CONCLUSIONS

Public involvement, even at a scarcely formalized level- increases the number of stakeholders and the interest of the general public in transportation policy choices, progressively moving the attention and the discussion from infrastructure investment and financing to a more complex and varied set of choices.

Public involvement efforts contribute to change the strategy of lobbies and key institutional and social stakeholders, which while on the one hand will try to benefit from the new opportunities of participation, and try to attract the general public to their views, on the other hand are compelled to better justify their proposals and to participate in the consensus-building process.

Although public involvement seems to facilitate consensus around the goals of sustainable mobility, the actual results may slow down the path for change. Public involvement stimulates the need for dialog and consensus among stakeholders. Ironically, the consensus building process is likely to strive for attracting the more conservative and influential groups rather than for gaining support for short-term implementation of radical measures. Furthermore, the general public and the media seems to be more sensitive to classical views on economic and spatial development linked to infrastructure development, rather than to environmental and social impacts. In fact, NIMBY attitudes seem to apply also to sustainable transportation, in form of attitudes such as: “sustainability, but somewhere else first”, at least for many local and regional authorities.

Regular monitoring of goals’ attainment is a powerful tool to both, facilitate consensus, and keep public involvement active, as well as to give the MoT some additional field to manage the general contradictions about sustainable goals and business-as-usual measures.

Social diversity has proved to be difficult to address during public involvement in long-term planning for various reasons: lack of organization of the various affected groups; lack of visibility of the link about national transportation policies and local/community needs, and the general acceptance of the “general interest” or “social optimum” as the balanced meeting point to reach consensus.

There are significant prospects for making public involvement more influential in long-term planning, even at the national levels. Linking goals to clear, outcome objectives, which could be monitored along the plan lifetime, would empower stakeholders to regularly revision their positions towards transportation policy, and be more pro-active at the revision stages. Benchmarking of national monitoring systems and outputs would reinforce the rationale for long-term planning and help to get innovative, successful measures accepted in other countries. Last, but not least, a more straightforward linking between general transportation policy goals and stakeholders’ daily interests, such as quality of service, environmental quality and access to development opportunities should keep alive and improve the dialog among technicians, decision makers and the public, and put additional pressure in the transportation sector to gather further evidence and develop a better understanding about these complex links.

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