



Does Aarhus make any sense?

Questioning the provision of public environmental information

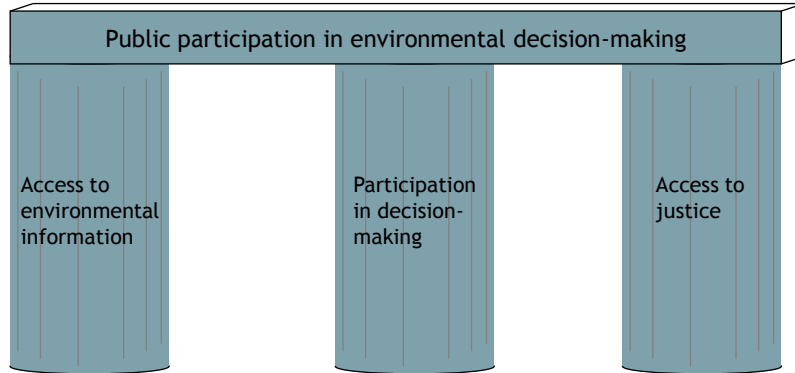
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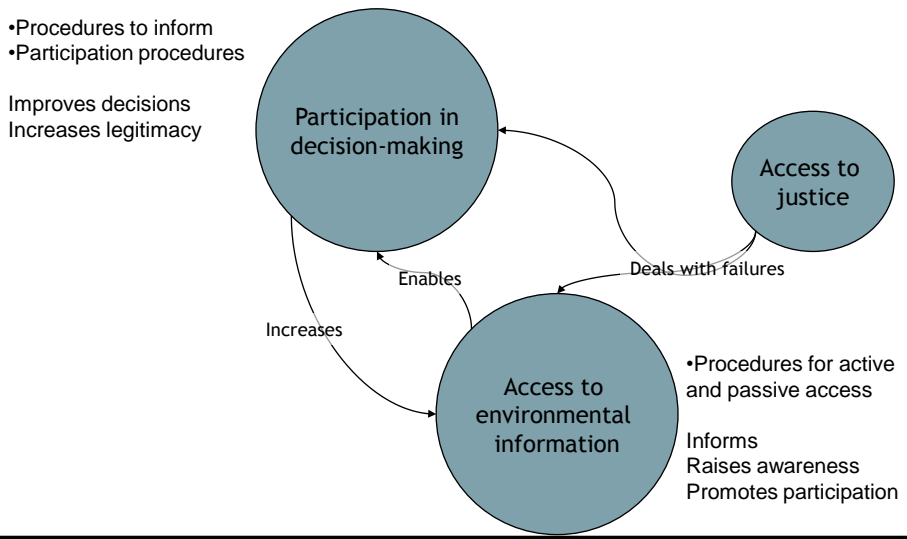
Outline

- Aarhus 3 'pillars'?
- The inherent assumptions in Aarhus/Principle 10
- The origins of information in environmental decision-making
- Why is information so significant?
- 'Environmental technophilia' and its consequences
- Implications for public access

The Aarhus 'pillars'



An alternative view of the Aarhus pillars



Tricycle?



The assumptions behind Aarhus

Public access to information

Public is more aware of environmental issues and its ability to participate in decision-making

Public participation in environmental decision making provides legitimacy, improved decisions and environmental justice

Access to information and participative democracy

- In democracies, there are many areas where participation occurs: elections for local and national government, policing, health, local development planning
- Yet in most of these areas, there is no direct link to information
- Freedom of information is seen as a general right that facilitates elections, accountability, and good governance - but it is not directly linked to policies on specific areas

Environmental politics and information

1969 NEPA (requirement from members of the CEQ):

“... a person who, as a result of his training, experience, and attainments, is exceptionally well qualified to analyze and interpret environmental trends and information of all kinds”

1972 Stockholm declaration, Principles 19 & 20:

“It is also essential that mass media of communications ... disseminates information of an educational nature on the need to protect and improve the environment”

“In this connection, the free flow of up-to-date scientific information and transfer of experience must be supported and assisted, to facilitate the solution of environmental problems”

The marriage of information and participation

1992 Rio declaration, (Principle 10):

“Environmental issues are best handled with participation of all concerned citizens, at the relevant level. At the national level, each individual shall have appropriate access to information concerning the environment that is held by public authorities, including information on hazardous materials and activities in their communities, and the opportunity to participate in decision-making processes. States shall facilitate and encourage public awareness and participation by making information widely available. Effective access to judicial and administrative proceedings, including redress and remedy, shall be provided.”

Information and environmental politics

- Ongoing emphasis on the importance of information
- Continuous discussion of [data, information] knowledge gap
- More recent realisation of information overload

In general: near obsession with information, more than in other areas

Why?

- Environmental problems are based on empirical sciences with a long tradition of fact-gathering and localised studies (physical geography, ecology, epidemiology) - collecting information is the modus operandi for environmental science
- Environmental problems are interdisciplinary problems, and many were discovered serendipitously (ozone hole, global dimming)
- High level of uncertainty, quest for forecasting and hunger for data to validate models and predictions

Information technology as saviour

- Since the 1960s, Information and Communication Technology is seen as the solution
- 1977 - Infoterra (5 years in development) (\$1500 per query, which could be answered with good card library)
- 1985 - Global Resources Information Database “for cost-effective telecommunication between GRID nodes, direct satellite links will clearly have to be established...” (\$2000000 investment in 1985)

Environmental Tecnophilia

Agenda 21 - "National and international data and information centres should set up continuous and accurate data-collection systems and make use of geographic information systems, expert systems, models and a variety of other techniques for the assessment and analysis of data."

"Using new electronic technologies can become a major tool in giving the public easy, cheap, direct access to information that the authorities hold. Using electronic means, in a sophisticated manner, is the answer to those countries' fear that they cannot provide the necessary manpower to respond to the needs of the public for information and participation in more bureaucratic manners." - John Hontelez, SG European Environmental Bureau, Environment for Europe Conference, Aarhus, Denmark, June 1998.

Consequences

- Development of bleeding-edge technology where cost-effectiveness and environmental contribution are questionable
- Playing down the digital divide, literacy and map reading skills
- Creation of monitoring programmes with data that no-one will ever use

Back to basics

- Information is NOT linked to participation in the way that Aarhus implies: the Aarhus model is simplistic and tells us more about environmental politics than about participation
- Participation is not just about scientific and government information, it is also about local knowledge and understanding
- It requires information, but also interpreters, technology chuffers and facilitators

Summary

- Aarhus makes some sense, but in a simplistic, uncritical way
- We need a better model of environmental information and its use by the public, not a wholesale exposure of raw data