

Interactive comment on “Participatory scenario development for integrated assessment of nutrient flows in a Catalan river catchment” by F. Caille et al.

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GENERAL COMMENT

This is an interesting and well-written paper documenting a public participation exercise used in the development of the IEA of nitrogen and phosphorus flows in a river system in Catalonia (Spain). It is a significant contribution to the unsettled discussion on how to implement the desire for genuine public participation in water governance as foreseen by the European Water Framework Directive. Specifically, it describes the process and results of a stakeholder scenario exercise, which were subsequently to be fed into a quantitative model.

The strength of the paper lies in its detailed description of the process, while the translation of the results into the model and the eventual success of the joint participation-modelling-assessment exercise remain undocumented and unclear. This limitation of scope of the paper is nevertheless acceptable, although at least some clarification on the details of the translation step and its uncertainties must be provided. It also remains unclear what was actually gained by the participatory process in terms of learning for the team performing the IEA. One might argue that the resulting scenarios and the N and P trends interpreted from them, are close to what a closed, common-sense approach could yield with much smaller efforts. Probably the text should state more clearly the precise objectives with the participatory process. I shall return to this below.

Another, but related, weakness of the paper as it stands, is a lack of written reflection upon the role of the researchers in a participatory exercise as the one undertaken, both as moderators and “owners” of the problem framing, including the bias and uncertainties that this introduces.

Finally, it is surprising to see a paper on the role of public participation in water management in Spain without finding reference to the debates on the New Culture of Water (Nueva Cultura del Agua), which explicitly have entered into a number of issues that should be relevant for this paper.

SPECIFIC COMMENTS

1. Although the description of the participatory process is detailed in rich in interesting and valuable observations, a number of questions appear unanswered: a) Was the participatory process introduced to the stakeholders mainly as an exercise for research purposes, or did it carry actual political power in any sense? b) If it was conceived as a “pure” research exercise, it probably nevertheless constituted a real and noteworthy event in the local community. What ramifications has this had, or may it have had? What precautions or reflections were carried out in advance to ensure an ethically and politically responsible handling of that aspect by the research team? What is the actual

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political context in the community in which the exercise was carried through? Is the issue conflictive and controversial, and how did this affect the recruitment and participation of stakeholders? The point is that the paper presents the public participation process as almost a purely scientific-technical exercise following handbooks of social science, while it at the same time also is a real political event, especially in a small community, that requires a description of the political context and how it was handled.

c) Were the objectives of the participatory process negotiated or in any way discussed with the stakeholders, and if not, why not? The reason why I ask is the rather unsatisfactory passage on p. 1285, where derogatory comments are made about participants “slowing down the process” before mentioning - without pursuing the matter further - the rather obvious possibility that something might have been at stake for participants if they tried to redirect the focus away from that preferred by the workshop moderators.

d) Do 12 participants mean 12 individuals, and if so, how does this add up with Table 1, which seems to specify 13 different bodies or entities? Also, industry was represented by 2 individuals, and “urbanisation” by 3? And how were the subgroups composed - for instance, it is not evident into which group a DPTOP or DMAH representative would be allocated. Explain and clarify.

2. Related to the first point, in particular point 1b) and 1c), the manuscript should be revised to include a reflection upon the role of the researchers and how their own methodological choices and actions are a source of bias, partiality and uncertainty. The manuscript states a contrast on p. 1282 between the subjectivity of story-telling and the “concept of quantitative analysis [which] relies on an idea of neutrality and accuracy”. Now, although the concept of quantitative analysis and accuracy are inherently linked, quantitative analysis does not necessarily assume neutrality. Indeed, the field of environmental science is marked by values of sustainability, protection of biological diversity, efficient use and protection of natural resources, etc, and this set of values permeate the submitted work, from its first sentence (“Rivers in developed regions are under significant stress...”). Hence, the statement on p. 1282 (“Based on participants’ comments, the scenario of sustainability was favoured as representing the preferred

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future...”) almost lends itself to an ironical comment: Could it have been otherwise - could the participatory exercise have given as a result that the IEA should redefine its objectives and assist an UNSustainable development in the actual place? I would think not; and the question then becomes to what extent the general value of sustainability and the specific values explicitly or implicitly conveyed by the Water Framework Directive have been endorsed by the research team and translated into its modus operandi during the design, recruitment and executive phases of the process. For instance, the manuscript is full of undefined and value-laden terms expressing judgements upon persons, things and events: a “neutral place” (p. 1272); “open attitude” (p. 1273); “communicative” (p. 1273); “the quality of the process” (p. 1283); “inability to deal with...” (p. 1285); “lack of knowledge” (p. 1285). My point here is simply not that these terms should be removed. In a sense, it is commendable and rare that papers show their value judgements so directly as in this paper. The problem is, however, that there is no accompanying reflection on whether these judgements are due to one’s own prejudices or other prior beliefs and values, and how this may have affected the research. In this respect, it is strange to find a reference to the tradition of action-research (Mumford 2001) without a discussion of what always was a central topic in action-research, namely who should have the right to define the research problem, the process and its objectives, and what is the proper relationship between researcher and the people into whose lives the researcher is intervening. In the tradition of post-normal science (see the writings of Funtowicz and Ravetz), the key question would be “Who is to judge on quality?” Their answer is would be that in order to have a genuinely participatory process, the stakeholders must be involved in the judgements on quality. From the manuscript in its present form I suspect that the process presented was rather more technocratic than what Funtowicz and Ravetz; or the action-research tradition; or part of the literature of the New Culture of Water would like to desire of public participation. This, I stress, does not invalidate the study. Also, a great deal of the participatory processes being seen currently in the European Union might better be characterised by a desire to comply with current political decisions and demands, with the objective of

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providing technical modes of management with a participatory gloss that adds some legitimacy; and on this background I do not doubt that the presented study really was performed with the sincere objective of achieving a real participatory process. To sum up: What is needed, though, is a) more careful reflection upon one's own role, and b) clarification of the actual objectives of the process. For instance, the text talks about social learning, without explaining who was to learn, why, and with what purpose.

3. It is acceptable that the translation step from the storylines to the quantitative model is not explained in full detail within the scope of this paper. However, at least some explanation to make it intelligible and credible must be provided, together with a discussion of the quality and uncertainty of that step. Where does the required exactitude of quantitative inputs come from? Specifically, fig 4 is not quantitative, and appears to provide little more than commonsensical results that a participatory process hardly was required for. Why do you consider the production of the storylines as a valuable improvement over your previous procedures to set the parameters of MONERIS? Or does the value rather lie in the integration of MONERIS into the participatory process? Please explain.

TECHNICAL DETAILS

1. The paper is amply and eclectically referenced, which this referee appreciates. However, I find it strange that there is little reference to the actual debates of public participation in the context of water management, specifically the New Culture of Water, as mentioned above.

2. English style and correction is generally excellent. "give their agreement" (p. 1275, line 15-16) sounds a bit awkward. "To lose" (as in Spanish "perder") should be written with one o and not with two, which it erroneously is throughout the text.

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