

ABSTRACT

From September 1998 till November 2000, the European research project called ADAPTA, *Assessing Debate and Participatory Technology Assessment*, of the FP4-Biotechnology programme (ELSA) has been carried out

The core of Adapta project is the analysis of the interactions between public debate, policy process and the many forms of public participation in science and technology policy making.

Six countries have been studied by national teams: Denmark, France, Germany, Portugal, The Netherlands, and the United Kingdom. Three fields of observation have been worked on the core issue of the project, the interactions between public debate and participatory technology assessment: urban transport, genetically modified organisms in food and agriculture and genetic testing. In total, 17 case studies have been carried out to assess those interactions. The urban transport debate cases have been used to test the field research methodology. This report is focused on the analysis and comparison of 12 cases which illustrate the way public debate develops in different European countries, concerning the use of GMOs in agriculture and food and of genetic testing for human health.

As a European research project, it took advantage of the variety of the situations and of our own perception (or misperception) of these differences. In this perspective, it was meaningful to observe that in some countries it was very difficult to find any formal dialogue arrangement or any pTA (say in Portugal) or that in other cases, the national research team considered that formal arrangement had to be considered in relation with various forms of direct action which trigger public debate, etc. This underlines the relevance of the comparative analysis. The processes of development of public debate and the emerging of the many forms of public participation may tell a lot on or need to be understood in the national context. Therefore, the analysis of the links between national context and the design of the formal dialogue arrangements and its roles or effects on the policy process have been central.

Comparing the forms of debate on GM food in the various countries

- In four countries out of six, Denmark, France, Germany and UK, the formal dialogue event is structured around lay citizens which play a central role in the assessment process. Three of them (Denmark, France and UK) can be considered as participatory technology assessment exercises
- When public debate has already developed, the possibility to influence it through formal dialogue arrangements as pTA is often limited. It is possible to better inform the policy process through "materialisation of the public opinion" and involvement of lay people. However, the re-appropriation of this result is limited in a situation where the actors strategize and contribute to the public-isation of the issues at stake.
- In such a context, the pressure of informal actors' intervention on the policy making has a leading influence on the structuring of the interactions between arenas and actors of the arenas.

- The possibility to implement early formal dialogue processes is related to a political culture of openness of policy process. Therefore, those processes should not be viewed as an isolated exercise but as a part of an overall effort towards wider public participation.

Comparing the forms of debate on the use of genetic testing

- In all countries, actors from civil society like patients' groups, civil right associations or churches intervene in the public debate by building new spaces for networking and joint strategy elaboration, that we have called hybrid fora. Such a process has a decisive influence on the public debate by channelling it at a trans-arena level.
- In Denmark, France, Germany and The Netherlands, the debate on predictive medicine is quite active and visible. For reproductive medicine, Germany seems to have a long and permanent debate, due to its past; in Denmark, there has been a long debate about reproductive medicine in Denmark, which helped to trigger the whole debate about gene technology in the political-regulatory and wider public arenas. Risks of discrimination are on the agendas in Denmark, France, while in Germany, the Netherlands, the United Kingdom and Portugal it is not so much the case.
- The rigorous legislation of some countries like Germany or Denmark has influence on the agendas by transforming some questions into non-issues. This means that we may have a quite broad debate without acute polarisation or controversy.
- In four of the six countries, we had observed formal dialogue processes (Denmark, Germany, the Netherlands and UK): in two countries, they were consensus conferences (Denmark and the Netherlands). The French case shows that the channelling of the dialogue between experts, ethicists and policy makers into the parliament under the authority of OPESET (the French technology board) also contributed to early policy decisions.
- On ethics, Denmark and Germany are more active than the others. In all countries, ethicists and social scientists underline risks such as eugenics induced by the use of prenatal diagnosis, social discrimination at work and health insurance against individuals presenting genetic predisposition to diseases.

Some conclusions

- In all countries, there is a clear public pressure for participating in the assessment of technology. This pressure may be seen as a social answer to the closeness of policy systems unable to provide acceptable solutions. Then, the demand for public participation is a reaction of society to the growing distrust towards policy institutions and science. In another perspective, the expressions of public participation can be seen as a positive signal for policy systems where enlightenment and empowerment of The public are or should be key values of democracy. This conclusive dimension on the roles of public participation as part of the policy process can be considered as relevant for European institutions as it concerns also the ways European institutions interact or should interact with society when elaborating and assessing science and technology policies.
- The forms of public participation in science and technology assessment are very diverse: They may be formal and informal. The formal forms are structured as formal dialogue arrangements (among them are the participatory technology assessment exercises, pTA) while the informal forms result from social actors' direct intervention in the public debate.
- The national socio-political culture and policy system are two key variables weighting a lot on the interactions between the formal and informal forms of public participation. In

some European societies, the possibility to organise early formal dialogue arrangements is related to the culture of openness of policy process. Therefore formal public participation should not be viewed as an isolated (one-off) event, isolated exercise but as a part of an overall effort towards wider public participation.