

# The Role of Publics and Deliberation

at the environmental  
science-policy interface

Summary Paper  
The Agile Initiative  
June 2024



Natural  
Environment  
Research Council



This document is a summary of a discussion paper that explores the relationship between environmental knowledge, policy and the public. It provides a set of provocative discussion questions to help funders, policy makers, practitioners, and researchers engage with these topics. The report was launched in June 2024, and the full discussion paper, as well as a recording of the launch webinar, can be found on the Agile website.

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## The Agile Initiative

The world's researchers have been working to understand and solve societal challenges such as biodiversity loss and climate change for decades. However, decision makers in government, NGOs and business need to have this information available to them in the format they need and at the moment that they are making critical policy choices.

The Agile Initiative at the Oxford Martin School aims to put this essential knowledge in their hands, and revolutionise how world-class, high-impact research supports policymaking. It responds to specific social and environmental policy questions with fast-paced solution-focused 'Sprints' that deliver demand-led new research precisely when it's needed. In these Sprints, new interdisciplinary research teams drawn from across Oxford work with partners to feed evidence into the policy cycle in real-time.

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# The Role of Publics and Deliberation at the Environmental Science-Policy Interface

## Summary Paper

### Why think about public participation?

Environmental knowledge, policy, and the public have always been entwined with one another, in a relationship that constitutes a central part of democracy<sup>1</sup>. In the face of global challenges such as the climate and biodiversity crises, the production of environmental knowledge is becoming an ever more public affair. Laboratories, it has been argued, have turned ‘inside out’ and morphed into a ‘world wide lab’<sup>2</sup>. Whether or not scientists and policy makers choose to carry out public engagement directly, the public are present in, and implicated by, their research and decisions. This document reviews the reasons for public participation, while highlighting that public participation is neither a panacea for decision-makers nor merely an unnecessary burden for publics. We describe the core tenets of deliberative democracy and the role of different sources of knowledges in public participation.

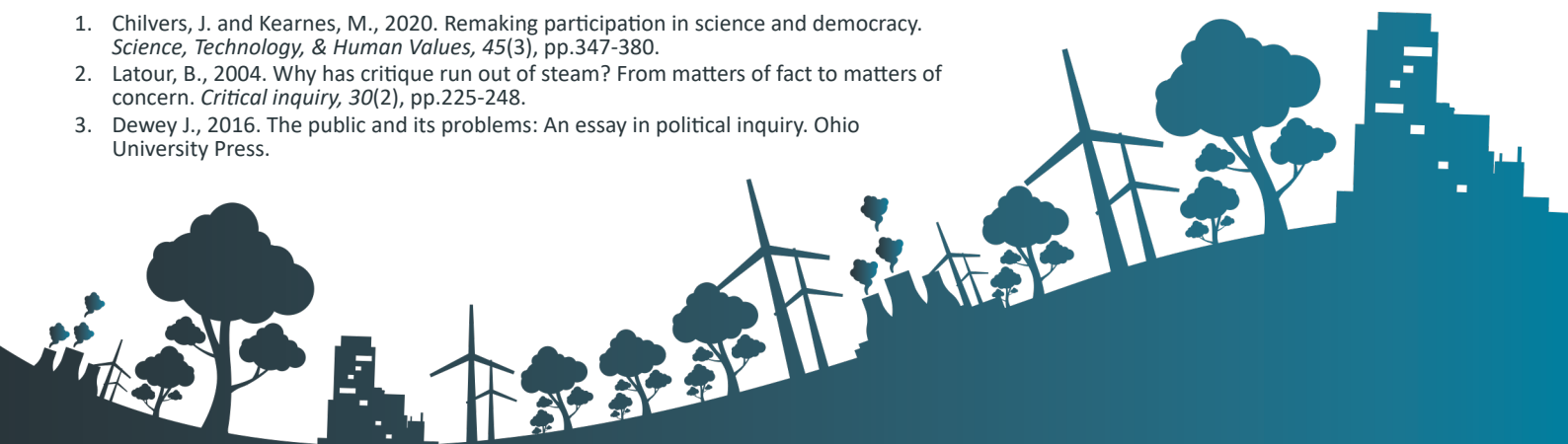
### What are publics?

The public can be defined as either<sup>3</sup>:

1. *A collection of individuals, a “homogenous whole”*
2. *A group that comes into existence in response to a particular issue, multiple and “emergent”*

The way publics are implicitly defined is important to address because it impacts the expectation, process, and outcome of public participation. Scholars have argued that a homogenous idea of the public can foreclose diversity, difference, and dissent, suggesting that perceiving the public as one singular group removes the inherent differences implicit within publics, and furthermore, is an inaccurate representation of how publics actually form. On the other hand, the idea of emergent and multiple publics is argued to be a more realistic representation of how publics come into being, highlighting that publics emerge in direct or indirect consequence of an event, out of a need to have those consequences tended to.

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1. Chilvers, J. and Kearnes, M., 2020. Remaking participation in science and democracy. *Science, Technology, & Human Values*, 45(3), pp.347-380.
  2. Latour, B., 2004. Why has critique run out of steam? From matters of fact to matters of concern. *Critical inquiry*, 30(2), pp.225-248.
  3. Dewey J., 2016. The public and its problems: An essay in political inquiry. Ohio University Press.



## Why engage the public?

There are two common reasons for engaging publics in environmental science<sup>4</sup>:

1. *To direct science-policy decisions towards more ethical decisions that better reflect public wishes*
2. *To co-produce new knowledge with participants*

Reason 1 sees public participation functioning as a kind of “check and balance” service for researchers and policy makers, that leads to more democratic decisions and helps to manage implicit uncertainties. The justification for public participation in Reason 2 is that publics have different kinds of expertise, from diverse experiences, and that researchers are not the only people with valid or useful knowledge that could inform environmental decision-making.

## Common risks associated with public participation in science include:

- Tokenism – ticking the box of public participation
- Placing a burden on participants, particularly those who are already marginalised, and reproducing social inequalities, e.g. those of higher social status speak over others, those better educated able to articulate themselves better and “convince” others
- Creating distance between governments and decisions, allowing governments to absolve themselves of responsibility for decisions

## Deliberative democracy

Deliberative democracy is one way of engaging the public through informed dialogue, reflection, and due consideration of the conflicting ideas and values which are embedded in environmental challenges<sup>5</sup>. Deliberative democratic processes idealise reliable enquiry, fair argumentation, and reasoned consensus<sup>6</sup>, however, some scholars have critiqued these narrow terms which place an emphasis on communicating through rational argument and reason<sup>7</sup>. This can exclude participants from being able to contribute in the manner that best suits them and prevent the kind of mass participation that proponents of deliberative processes are hoping for. As a response, new interpretations of deliberation have emerged, considering it as a broader category with looser conditions, for example, including more diverse forms of communication, such as storytelling, rhetoric, and emotion<sup>8</sup>.

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4. Demeritt, D., 2015. The promises of participation in science and political ecology. In *The Routledge handbook of political ecology* (pp. 224-234). Routledge.
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  7. Baber, W. and Bartlett, R., 2005. *Deliberative Environmental Politics: Democracy and Ecological Rationality*. The MIT Press.
  8. Young, I.M., 1996. Communication and the other: Beyond deliberative democracy. *Democracy and difference: Contesting the boundaries of the political*, 31, pp.120-135.



The creation of mini-publics can produce more place-based, localised, and bottom-up insights<sup>9</sup>, and generate situated and local knowledge around issues, as well as prompting reflection on a plurality of perspectives, including non-humans, nature, and future generations<sup>10</sup>. However, addressing environmental problems with greater participation will not necessarily generate the outcomes decision makers desire, potentially adding greater conflict, complexity, and diverse viewpoints to processes<sup>11</sup>. To reflect the conflictual and political nature of environmental issues, some scholars argue that deliberative processes should aim for achieving mutual understanding over mainstream attempts to establish consensus<sup>12</sup>. **Mutual understanding may ensure that all viewpoints, including those in the minority, are accounted for, without removing diversity or disagreement.** However, it can also prove difficult if policy makers are hoping for clearcut outcomes formulated into recommendations.

## Examples of deliberative methods:

**Citizens assembly:** A large group engage in a lengthy process of learning and deliberation and a collective decision.

**Deliberative mapping:** Criteria (e.g. economic, social, and ethical) determined by citizens & experts to rate policy options.

**Deliberative opinion poll:** Participants are polled before and after a debate in which key players are interrogated.

## Sources of knowledge in public deliberation

Public deliberation requires the use of expert knowledge, most notably for informing participants about a particular issue. In some cases, the presence of experts can create tensions in a process seeking to generate more local and situated knowledges through public participation. Due consideration should be given to the scope and complexity of the topic, the position that the expert holds in that space, and the ability for participants to deliberate independently. **The inclusion of interdisciplinary expertise can contextualise the value judgements, trade-offs, and socio-political nature of environmental decision-making<sup>13</sup>.** A performative approach encourages neither a utopian image as able to remove implicit assumptions and framings, nor a negative image as a useless task that only legitimises existing solutions. Thus, knowledge can be perceived as useful, but with the caveat and acknowledgement that it has been created in a particular context<sup>14</sup>.

9. Ostfeld, R. and Reiner, D.M., 2020. Public views of Scotland's path to decarbonization: Evidence from citizens' juries and focus groups. *Energy Policy*, 140, p.111332.

10. Eckersley, R. 1992. Environmentalism and political theory: Toward an ecocentric approach. Routledge.

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13. Mouffe, C., 1999. Deliberative Democracy or Agonistic Pluralism? *Social Research*. 1:66(3)

14. Turnhout, E., Van Bommel, S. and Aarts, N., 2010. How participation creates citizens: participatory governance as performative practice. *Ecology and Society*, 15(4).



## Key takeaways for thinking about effective public participation

- Publics can be perceived as a homogenous whole or as emerging around a particular issue
- Public participation can contribute to, or challenge, a techno-managerial approach
- Consider the processes, characteristics, and ideals of deliberation, including the forms of communication
- What constitutes “success” for deliberation: consider whether consensus or mutual understanding is an ideal outcome
- Presenting experts as ‘advocates’ or ‘informants’ and minimizing their presence during deliberation
- Interdisciplinarity can contextualise political nature of decision-making, values, and trade-offs
- Assumptions, restrictions, and expectations are inherent to any participatory process
- Running critical thinking sessions can help publics contextualise the information they receive from experts



## Discussion questions

Here, we outline a set of discussion and provocation questions which are intended to help readers engage and reflect with the themes covered in this report.

### For funders, policy makers, and practitioners

1. What is the role of publics and deliberation at the science-policy interface?
2. What types of decision could benefit from the involvement of the public and why?
3. If we accept that an informed public is a necessary precursor for effective deliberation, how can environmental science, and wider research, help to inform publics for effective participation?

### For researchers

1. Can the public be a valid contributor to environmental knowledge? If so, how?
2. How, and in what ways, could public deliberation be integrated into environmental research?
3. Can environmental knowledge production ever be separated from its sociopolitical and public contexts?

### For the Agile Initiative

1. What are the implicit understandings of the public in the Agile sprints?
2. Are there risks of prioritising policy communities in Agile, and if so, what are they? Is there a risk of perpetuating a 'techno-managerial' approach to environmental issues, where environmental issues are framed as needing technological problem-solving without sociopolitical contextualisation?
3. (How) does Agile affect or include the public? Which publics are emerging around Agile?

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Natural  
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Research Council

The Agile Initiative is supported by the Natural Environment Research Council as part of the Changing the Environment Programme – NERC grant reference number NE/W004976/1



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