Organizing Citizen Engagement for Democratic Environmental Planning

LINDA P. WAGENET AND MAX J. PFEFFER
Development Sociology Department, Cornell University, Ithaca, New York, USA

In recent years civic engagement emphasizing community involvement and collective learning has become a centerpiece of environmental management. This article explores civic participation in water resources management and whether a framework developed by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (U.S. EPA) fosters democratic environmental planning. We provide an overview of citizen involvement in water resource management, discuss the U.S. EPA framework, and highlight key issues with two case studies. It is widely acknowledged that lack of meaningful stakeholder and other public input in the planning process may lead to barriers to successful environmental management. Our case studies indicate that the U.S. EPA framework, while not new or especially innovative, represents a necessary commitment to civic engagement and provides a structure for organizing it. Findings from our study emphasize the importance of financial resources and strong commitment to the principle of civic engagement in order to increase and sustain the democratic underpinnings of environmental planning.

Keywords    citizen engagement, environmental management, public participation, stakeholder involvement, water resource policy

There is significant interest at the local, state, and national levels in strengthening citizen and stakeholder participation in environmental management. This interest builds on the long history of civic engagement in the United States. Over time, some forms of this engagement have increased in popularity while others have declined (Putnam 1995; 1996; 2000; Smith et al. 1997). New forms of involvement have also arisen, especially in the environmental domain. Smith et al. (1997) note that descriptions of procedures for fostering public input have dominated the literature with little attention paid to fundamental concepts. In fact, Smith et al. go farther in their critique, claiming that many of these recommended techniques are based on untested and unanalyzed assumptions.

As the influence of the environmental movement grew in the 1960s, it stimulated the enactment of a variety of landmark environmental legislation beginning late in that decade. The expectation of inputs from the public, broadly defined, in decision-making processes was established in the 1969 National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) and was included in virtually all environmental legislation enacted
subsequently. In this way, civic engagement in environmental decision making was formalized. However, the insertion of public engagement into policy formation and implementation has been difficult, as more than 30 years of experience attest.

Public engagement in environmental policy has evolved considerably over the years, often becoming more narrowly focused on specific citizens or other stakeholders. Change has often been a response to dissatisfaction with methods for garnering this engagement. The basic challenge has been to provide effective channels for nonagency inputs and agency response to those inputs in the formation and implementation of environmental policies. It is widely acknowledged that lack of meaningful inputs in the planning process from a variety of publics may lead to barriers to successful environmental management, including public opposition (Walesh 1999). In recent years there has been a significant emphasis on citizen and stakeholder engagement at the local level, where there can be an ongoing process of community involvement and collective learning (NRC 1999; John 1994).

In this article, we focus on civic participation in water resources planning and management. Water resource policy has a long history in the United States and provides a good example to place current engagement efforts in historical context. We provide an overview of the evolution of public involvement in water policy issues, discuss current attention from the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (U.S. EPA) to public participation, and link the discussion to two examples from New York State. Our goal is to examine the agency role in and effectiveness of approaches to watershed management that focus on citizen and stakeholder participation and to address the following question: Does the organization of stakeholder engagement within a framework from the U.S. EPA encourage more democratic environmental planning?

Development of Citizen Engagement in Watershed Management

The emphasis on public engagement at the local level is a relatively recent innovation in watershed management. Early water resource management was driven by policymakers and experts with limited stakeholder inputs. In U.S. history, the federal government’s early focus in water management was on inland navigation, followed by flood control, irrigation, hydroelectric power development, and, recently, river basin planning. Little attention was given to long-range environmental planning until the 1960s, when the federal government undertook a comprehensive approach in an attempt to get away from the ad hoc policy atmosphere that had existed (Feldman 1991). However, throughout this history there has been sensitivity to the implications of such management for democracy. Feldman (1991, 9) posits that using army engineers in the late 19th and early 20th centuries to develop water resources “was linked to the desire to avoid creating an aloof and highly educated military establishment that might become contemptuous of democratic values.” This strategy made sense in light of a civilian engineering bureaucracy that was inadequately developed.

In the early 1900s almost all federal environmental policy and planning revolved around water projects. Although the past 30 years have seen citizen and stakeholder participation being codified in environmental planning (e.g., the National Environmental Quality Act of 1969) and developed into a technical and ethical expectation (NRC 1996; 2004; Rosenbaum 1991), the early part of the 20th century saw federal agencies acting unilaterally, focusing public relations efforts on gaining citizen approval of specific projects rather than on incorporating citizens into the decision-making process. The Administrative Procedures Act of 1946 can be viewed
as an attempt to change the regulatory atmosphere by equalizing the government and citizens in a legal sense (Shapiro 2004), but public engagement that existed until the 1960s tended to be formal and highly structured, with more attention on information dissemination than on developing an engaged citizenry.

The 1960s saw increased public involvement in environmental management due to citizen concerns about environmental degradation and the lack of citizen involvement in the environmental regulatory structure. The Water Resources Council, created in 1961, had authority to seek justification for new projects and required stakeholder participation. Another innovation in the 1960s was the development of coordinated resource management processes (CRM), which was an attempt to join “resource managers and stakeholders in localized problem-solving exercises” (Kenney 1999, 497). In many ways, CRM has had a lasting effect and can be viewed as a precursor to environmental management on a watershed basis (Kenney 1999).

Perhaps the most influential legislation fostering civic engagement in environmental management was the 1969 National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA), as well as its revisions in 1978. NEPA established a benefit/cost analysis for all environmental impact statements. It also required agencies to put a priority on issues that needed a full analysis, as opposed to lesser issues, and acknowledged the need for community input (Sexton et al. 1999; Feldman 1991). In this way, NEPA forced a consideration of alternative strategies in environmental management as well as a move away from strict consideration of only the economic benefits of a project.

The U.S. EPA, established in 1970, consolidated a number of programs from various agencies such as the Department of the Interior, the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare, the Food and Drug Administration, and the Department of Agriculture (Cech 2003; NRC 1999). The U.S. EPA now has a commitment to the framework of community-based decision making through a variety of programs, especially its Community-Based Environmental Planning (CBEP) process (U.S. EPA 2003a). John and Mlay (1999, 354) contend that CBEP was not included in early environmental regulation “because it was feared that industry would leave or not locate in, towns that had environmental regulation.” Now there is a vision of a two-pronged system: “one with strong centralized standard-setting and oversight alongside pragmatic, bottom-up decision-making.”

Water resource management has undergone a paradigm shift in the last decade. Previously, when control of point source pollution was the primary goal of regulatory agencies, involving the public in management of natural resources was a secondary objective. Rather, the command and control model was commonly utilized (U.S. EPA 2002; Kraft 1999; John and Mlay, 1999; Murdock and Sexton 1999). With the success of point-source pollution control measures, attention turned to the impact of diffuse, nonpoint sources of pollution, which required the focus to be on the relationships between individuals and environmental contaminants that resulted from human behavior (U.S. EPA 2002). This shift toward “place-based” rather than “media- or issue-based problems” demanded that citizens and other stakeholders be incorporated into environmental management if it were to be effective in addressing problems associated with nonpoint source pollution (U.S. EPA 2002).

Stakeholder Involvement in Watershed Management

Two contemporary water quality challenges are to solve water quality problems and to engage stakeholders. The current view is that success in environmental
management comes from a number of varied “publics” rather than from inclusion of merely a number of different individuals or special interests (Walesh 1999; Smith et al. 1997; Sanoff 2000). Walesh (1999) finds it incumbent upon the water professional to (1) convey awareness of the environmental problem, (2) gather supplemental information, and (3) build support for implementation. This, however, still represents a mostly “top-down” view of public participation, in which an agency is directing the process. Many authors have developed plans for water quality improvement as well as studying the characteristics of successful watershed associations. Although each includes public involvement at nearly every stage, the framework continues to be one in which the agency or regulator is in charge (NRC 1999; Cortese 1999; Walesh 1999; Mullen and Allison 1999; Sexton et al. 1999; Daniels and Walker 1996). In many ways, the agency decision makers define the citizen or stakeholder role in the process. Also, they constrain participation by the very issues brought forward and by the way in which that is done, be it through timing, publicity, control over report authorship, etc., all of which Irwin (2001, 9) labels “preframing the agenda.”

Dryzek (1997) contrasts two abstract models of the social organization of environmental planning: administrative rationalism and democratic pragmatism. The former is based in professional resource management bureaucracies, is expert driven, and has an emphasis on regulation and the rationalization of environmental planning. On the other hand, democratic pragmatism involves elements of public consultation, alternative dispute resolution, policy dialogue, public engagement, and an emphasis on local decision making and local control. Dryzek understands, however, that there are limits to democratic pragmatism because of power differentials among stakeholders with competing interests. Also, there is typically weaker institutional support of public interests than of private ones, and the administrative rationalism of the past continues to pervade the democratic pragmatism that is currently taking shape.

Many authors see this movement toward including broad-based input in environmental management decisions as a positive occurrence for both ecosystem and human well-being (Williams 2002; Ravindra 2000; Zazueta 1995). There is little understanding, however, concerning the best way to involve the community in decision making (Finnegan and Sexton 1999). Kraft (1999) echoes this conclusion and sees public opinion as having had a significant impact on environmental policy for the past three decades, with an inherent problem that public opinion does not necessarily coincide with scientific evidence. John and Mlay (1999, 361) suggest a dual system encompassing a strong centralized regulatory infrastructure combined with focus on “top-down support for bottom-up initiatives.”

Recently, the U.S. EPA issued its Public Involvement Policy (U.S. EPA 2003d) outlining broad goals for citizen and other stakeholder participation in environmental decision making and management as well as specific guidance for their implementation. The U.S. EPA includes as part of the discussion a commitment to an open process that it sees resulting in increased agency credibility. The agency outlines minimum requirements for public participation and encourages efforts to go beyond those requirements defining involvement as a consideration of “public concerns, values, and preferences when making decisions” (U.S. EPA 2003d). There is a long list of goals within the policy, many of which focus on soliciting information from specific stakeholders and the public more generally in order to better inform decisions and to glean possible consequences of whatever technical issue the U.S. EPA addresses. Although the public participation policy is meant to be applied to all
programs and activities, the document notes that the policy is not a legally enforceable regulation and that the agency has the authority to limit involvement as it sees fit.

Given the history of public involvement in environmental issues that we have discussed, the relevance and effectiveness of the U.S. EPA’s new framework for public involvement in environmental management are important issues. With the U.S. EPA’s commitment to involving citizens in decision making comes a concern about the true nature of that involvement. As Kenney (1999, 498) expresses:

While local governments and stakeholders are often tangentially involved in these programs through mandatory public participation processes, many of the most salient regulatory programs channel decisions almost exclusively through federal agencies and, eventually, through federal courts where the influence of national interest groups is paramount.

To illustrate some of the issues relative to implementing a stakeholder involvement framework, we discuss two New York State case studies and draw conclusions concerning the realities of public participation in watershed management, especially in terms of regulatory agency roles.

**Data and Methods**

Our case studies are located in the Upper Hudson River Valley and Onondaga County, both in upstate New York. We chose these particular cases because they represent different models of public involvement in environmental management. In the Upper Hudson River Valley, the U.S. EPA has included stakeholder participation as a necessary element in cleaning up polychlorinated biphenyl (PCB) contamination. This case represents what Zazueta (1995) labeled as state-defined, sanctioned participation with a goal of reducing conflicts and highlighting areas of agreement that can lead to action.

In Onondaga County, the Midland Avenue combined sewer overflow site (Syracuse, New York) has been described by one local official as a very successful effort utilizing grass-roots organization, yet another stakeholder thinks it is a “political hotbed” that should not be touched “with a 10 foot pole.” This site represents Zazueta’s (1995) model of independent political organizing that often centers on the disempowered stakeholder.

We created the case-study histories based on data from open-ended key informant interviews and, in the Upper Hudson study, observations from attendance at public meetings. In addition, we consulted a variety of reports and background information on both issues. Tellis (1997) provides a comprehensive review of the case-study methodology underscoring the tenets of qualitative research, which are to describe, understand, and explain. The sources of evidence for a case study, according to Stake (1995), can be documents, archives, interviews, direct observations, participant observations, or physical artifacts, many of which we utilized for our study. However, Tellis (1997, 5) summarizes the function of cases studies as we see it in his citation of Feagin et al. (1991): “The quintessential characteristic of case studies is that they strive towards a holistic understanding of cultural systems of action.”

The key informants in Onondaga County were managers in government agencies (e.g., New York State Department of Environmental Conservation [NYSDEC],
Onondaga County Planning Department), local citizens, and university researchers. For the Hudson River Valley case, an in-depth interview with the U.S. EPA’s project manager provided extensive background information. Our attendance at public meetings around the Hudson River Valley gave us substantial insight into citizen and stakeholder involvement and the relationships between agency and public representatives. All interviews were conducted informally and privately. In Onondaga County, some informants were interviewed repeatedly (up to three times), and others were interviewed only once. Three key informants with a reputation for their involvement in the issue were initially chosen by us, contacted, and interviewed. We asked these informants to refer us to additional key informants. We continued our interviews and contacts as long as we uncovered new information. Altogether we interviewed 10 key informants—of whom 9 were in Onondaga County and 1 in the Hudson River Valley. Wagenet conducted the interviews and kept extensive notes on all the interviews and meetings. Due to the contentiousness of the issues involved, we did not tape-record the interviews. The field notes were reviewed to construct a coherent and consistent history of each case and to identify the key engagement practices.

**Watershed Management in New York State**

Although a complete history of each case study is outside the scope of this article, we provide a brief background of each, emphasizing the nature of stakeholder involvement.

**Upper Hudson River**

The General Electric Corporation (GE) has a long history in the Upper Hudson River Valley. The company discharged PCBs into the river for 30 years, resulting in the NYSDEC declaring its intentions to remove contaminated sediment by a dredging process and to develop a hazardous waste site to encapsulate the dredged material (U.S. EPA 2005).

GE voluntarily ended disposal of PCBs into the Hudson River in 1977, and the contaminant concentration declined for many years. By the 1990s, however, tests showed that the chemical continued to leach into the water column. Even dredging sediment from the Upper Hudson River will not remove all the PCBs present. In fact, spending an estimated one-half billion dollars on the project will only cut from 60 to 30 years the time for PCB concentrations in Hudson River fish to fall below the U.S. Food and Drug Administration-approved levels (personal communication, N. G. Kaul 4/25/03).

Throughout this process, certain segments of the public in the area were not convinced that the dredging operation was necessary. Early in the conflict, a group of local residents formed Citizen Environmentalists Against Sludge Encapsulation (CEASE) because they did not want the waste disposed of locally. There was a fear in the local communities that dredging would actually result in increased PCB concentrations. In addition, GE had been a long-standing employer in the area, providing jobs, recreational facilities, and other services, and publicly opposed the proposed dredging and encapsulation.

In 2003, the U.S. EPA announced an agreement with GE to perform the project design work for the cleanup of PCB-contaminated sediment in the Hudson River
GE would absorb all costs of the project, estimated to total five hundred million dollars.

[U.S.] EPA will work with GE to ensure that this complex project is performed in a safe and efficient manner. [U.S.] EPA stands by its commitment to invite and consider public input on major issues throughout the project. (U.S. EPA 2003b)

To this end, the U.S. EPA hired a consultant to establish public participation, provided various opportunities for education, and reviewed more than 90,000 public comments related to the project. The U.S. EPA developed “Quality of Life Performance Standards” as a direct result of public input. These standards addressed traffic, noise, lighting, air quality, odor, aesthetics, and recreation (U.S. EPA 2003b).

The funding level and use of professional consultants to establish a participation framework highlight how structured and well-financed the public participation segment of the Hudson River dredging project has been. The situation is not currently mired in conflict or litigation. Work has progressed according to a timetable that includes citizen concerns. In contrast, the Onondaga County study originated in conflict and evolved into a much more random process of public involvement. We now turn to that case.

Midland Avenue Combined Sewer Overflow

Approximately two-thirds of the City of Syracuse (Onondaga County, NY) is served with combined sewers, where sewage and stormwater flow through the same pipe network. When a storm event overloads the system, untreated sewage may be routed into stream tributaries rather than to a wastewater treatment facility. In the mid-1980s, Onondaga County undertook a physical best management practices program to upgrade and repair the trunk sewer, interceptor sewer, and combined sewer overflow (CSO) system (Onondaga County Department of Water Environment Protection 2003). The Midland Avenue service area, a poor neighborhood in South Syracuse, contains 21 CSOs. Due to a federal directive, and with financing from federal, state, and local governments, there has been a proposal since 1998 for Onondaga County to construct a CSO Regional Treatment Facility (RTF) on a vacant lot in the area. For this area, there are approximately 50 sewage overflow events per year. With offline storage, the proposed RTF would fully function about nine times per year (Onondaga County Department of Water Environment Protection 2003). Effluent from this facility would flow into Onondaga Lake, a severely polluted, urban body of water, which at times receives 20% of its inflow from the sewage treatment facility (Our Lake 2004). The RTF is especially important due to Onondaga Lake’s inclusion on the federal Superfund National Priorities List.

A small group of citizens in the Midland Avenue neighborhood has resisted Onondaga County’s attempts to construct the RTF. There is fear that disruption of the current pipe network will cause an infestation of rats. Local citizens also object to the proposed size of the facility as well as the technology itself and have offered alternative strategies to the county. The City of Syracuse, in response to citizen concerns, has sued Onondaga County, although to date every lawsuit has favored the county position.
Very little community/county negotiation has occurred. In this case, the argument is not so much about any facility being constructed. Rather, citizens have determined that they do not approve of the proposed facility and want consideration of alternatives. The project is awarding construction contracts totaling an estimated fifty-two million dollars. As one official noted: “[W]e have moved from ‘protests’ to ‘resistance’ with our detractors.”

Case Study Comparison and Analysis

The framework from the U.S. EPA (2003d) provides the agency’s vision for incorporating the public into environmental management, and we use it as an evaluative standpoint for our case studies. We ask, however, whether adherence to this framework leads to a higher level of democracy in environmental planning, or whether public participation efforts are mere facades (Smith et al. 1997, 143). The U.S. EPA framework is given next, with comments relating agency roles in each case study to the U.S. EPA guidelines.

1. Plan and budget for activities (through advance planning, early notice to stakeholders, adequate time and resources, evaluation): Because the Upper Hudson River Valley dredging project is viewed by the U.S. EPA as a pilot project for implementation of the public involvement policy, there has been a concerted effort to establish a timeline of activities and to approach the project in a very systematic manner. In terms of budget, however, the situation is unique. GE’s funding provides increased opportunity for a more strategic approach to outreach than is evident in the Midland Avenue case where Onondaga County is funding the construction of the RTF and, within that more limited budget, providing outreach and education. In addition, litigation has consumed county project funds that were originally earmarked for community benefits. Thus, in the Upper Hudson case, the U.S. EPA coordinated public involvement and had the budget to follow through. Onondaga County did not assume that role, instead taking a more passive approach to involvement and using evening workshops as outreach to the public.

2. Identify appropriate stakeholders (public who may have expressed an interest in or may be affected by an upcoming U.S. EPA activity): The U.S. EPA utilized an independent consulting firm to formulate a public participation plan. The consultant surveyed in the area approximately 150 people, who represented various stakeholder groups. Following this, the U.S. EPA developed an independent advisory group to oversee public involvement in the process. The agency was proactive in identifying individuals or groups whose voices needed to be heard. Onondaga County officials did some limited outreach to community groups in the form of evening workshops. These were mostly loose associations of neighborhood citizens rather than a sustained stakeholder group that regularly met to address citizen concerns. The county did not formally incorporate affected stakeholders and representatives of the neighborhood and took an approach that was more reactive than proactive.

3. Consider technical/financial assistance to facilitate involvement (help build capacity to understand technical issues and enable people to participate substantively): The U.S. EPA had the budgetary means to build citizen understanding of the processes proposed as well as the long-term environmental implications
for the communities in the area. Utilizing its substantial budget for outreach and education to engage an outside consulting firm assisted this effort. In the Midland Avenue case, Onondaga County did not actively facilitate community engagement nor did it seek full participation by local groups from the project’s inception. Citizens involved in the issue did not use Onondaga County as a resource for technical information nor to build their understanding of the issues.

4. Develop information and outreach for the public (accurate, understandable, pertinent and timely information to facilitate effective involvement): In the Hudson River case, the U.S. EPA was committed to providing as much information as possible about the project particulars: timelines, impacts, etc. The agency viewed information about the project not as U.S. EPA’s information or GE’s information—it was “project information.” The U.S. EPA undertook a concerted effort to have public meetings, open houses, displays, and river trips while providing technical as well as nontechnical written information to “make sure the locals understand” and to “show our thinking” (personal communication, N. G. Kaul 4/25/03). On the other hand, in the Midland Avenue case, Onondaga County has been open with documentation about the project, but has not concentrated on producing useful information for the residents. Rather, communication has taken the form of updates. More importantly, by taking a reactive approach to communication, Onondaga County has had to counter baseless accusations about rat infestations and other negative publicity.

5. Undertake public consultation (understand the needs of the affected public; provide for an open exploration of the issues, alternatives and consequences): As noted earlier, the U.S. EPA, through the consulting firm it hired, created a draft Citizen Involvement Plan, a document “that community members can use to make sure that [US]EPA is responsive to their needs and concerns” (U.S. EPA 2003b). In Onondaga County, although public meetings about the CSO project date back to 1979 (Onondaga County Department of Water Environment Protection 2003), public consultation was not formalized and active. Rather, the county viewed the project as a benefit to the area and did not foresee the negative reaction to the extent that eventually arose.

6. Review and use input, and provide feedback to the public (consistently earn and retain the public’s trust and communicate how public input affected decisions): The U.S. EPA received more than 90,000 comments from the public in its outreach efforts for the Hudson River project. There are several instances where the agency used those comments to enact policy changes or to amend practices for the project. The U.S. EPA then relayed to the public the changes that resulted from community input. This engendered goodwill and let interested citizens know that their voices were heard. Although Onondaga County officials did take public concerns into consideration, late in the process they viewed changes resulting from citizen input to be unworkable or too costly. Following a strongly negative neighborhood reaction to the planned RTF, the agency did reach out to various stakeholders, but by that time the animosity toward the project had taken hold.

7. Evaluate public involvement activities (assess the effectiveness of public involvement): The U.S. EPA officials in the Upper Hudson area utilized a 1-year pilot project as an initial evaluative tool. The agency committed to very specific engineering and performance standards that must be met at various points in the project in order for it to proceed, including those that relate to quality of life. In fact, the U.S. EPA will not undertake Phase II dredging until the agency
and the public are satisfied with preliminary results. The Midland Avenue case has no formalized evaluation procedures in place. Onondaga County has not undertaken any strict review of the effectiveness of public involvement in the controversy. Updates on the project are provided on the agency’s website, although information is technical in nature (Onondaga Lake Improvement Project 2006).

**Discussion and Conclusions**

What is similar about both our case studies is that they involve governmental agencies trying to "clean up" the environment in light of citizen resistance to those efforts. Therefore, the challenge remains for policymakers to bring citizens into the scientific and regulatory process in a meaningful way. Having described each agency’s role in the process, and using U.S. EPA’s public participation guidelines as a standard, we can evaluate the levels of success of incorporating citizens and other stakeholders into environmental management and how well this relates to democratic environmental planning. Although there initially was conflict over the Hudson River dredging project, by strict adherence to its new model of public participation, the U.S. EPA has overcome much of the resistance to the project from area residents. The generous funding from GE, however, cannot be ignored and makes possible much of the public outreach and information dissemination required by the U.S. EPA’s public participation framework. Also, with GE and the U.S. EPA in agreement on the price tag as well as the process, opposing groups have been quieted. The U.S. EPA has demonstrated a commitment to an open process; however, the agency is still in charge of all phases of the project, including the public outreach portion. As N.G. Kaul, the project director, noted (personal communication, N. G. Kaul 4/25/03):

> [US]EPA has to follow rules and regulations or it gets sued. The public doesn’t fully understand how regulated [US]EPA really is. The ultimate decision-maker is the [US]EPA Administrator. He or she cannot give up that authority to an advisory group or a politician. Therefore, an advisory group is *just that*.

The Midland case, on the other hand, is much more locally based, with disagreements between Onondaga County (the lead entity) and the City of Syracuse as well as between Onondaga County and local citizens. There was no attempt by Onondaga County officials to undertake formalized public participation or to follow a specific set of guidelines to achieve such involvement from local citizens. Rather, a litigious atmosphere dominated citizen/county relationships and often blocked substantive dialogue that could enhance conflict resolution. Also, the county did not have the budget that was available to the U.S. EPA in the Upper Hudson Valley case.

The theories noted earlier in this article vary in terms of how citizens best fit into the environmental management scheme. John and Mlay’s (1999, 361) suggested dual system of a centralized regulatory infrastructure focused on “top-down support for bottom-up initiatives” may provide the most realistic framework for public involvement, and the U.S. EPA guidelines echo this vision. Also, Dryzek’s (1997) notion of democratic pragmatism seeks to bring citizens and stakeholders into equal positions...
of power in environmental management issues, especially with its emphasis on local control. Notably, local control was lacking in the Midland Avenue case, the elements of which are more in keeping with Smith et al. (1997), who think that any efforts to include the public in environmental management and planning will be based in more traditional methods. The U.S. EPA framework seems to go beyond a traditional view of public consultation to a deeper view of citizens as true stakeholders in environmental management issues.

From the examples given here, we believe the U.S. EPA framework provides a positive means of organizing stakeholder engagement. As mentioned previously, however, the framework is not necessarily new or innovative. What makes this framework unique is the agency’s underlying support of and investment in it, and these may be the most crucial steps toward successful environmental management. The U.S. EPA was committed to public involvement and consideration of public concerns regarding the Hudson River dredging. These were not key features of the Midland Avenue case. Onondaga County did not foresee the problems that arose from neighborhood groups and was not focused on bringing those groups fully into the discussion of the RTF. By not anticipating the negative reaction from local groups, lawsuits delayed the project, and funding that was set aside for outreach and education as well as some community benefits was instead used for legal proceedings.

Early in this article, we asked whether the organization of stakeholder engagement within the U.S. EPA framework encourages democratic environmental planning. We found that strict adherence to the framework, along with sufficient funding to enlist professional assistance in citizen engagement, did increase the range of public inputs to the planning process. Also, the Hudson River case represents a step away from the simple information dissemination in the 1960s toward developing an engaged citizenry. However, the Hudson River case is also very specialized with broad federal agency support. The Midland Avenue case is much more localized and limited in terms of budget. Making the U.S. EPA framework successful at that local level has proven to be more challenging. Onondaga County’s response to citizen concern was neither formalized nor structured.

We believe that an educated public is required for effective participation, but regulatory agencies must engage the public meaningfully through a holistic deliberative process (NRC 1996; 1999). Too often, agencies appear to view public participation as something to “check off” in the list of steps to effective environmental management. The citizen role in the cases discussed in this paper demonstrates that such an attitude can impede the entire process. What these case studies also highlight is the disparity of institutional capacity between the two situations. The role played by financial constraints is crucial since generous funding promotes personnel and product development. Smith et al. (1997, 142) note: “The degree of autonomy that characterizes pressure group organizations is a function of their ability to secure resources.” However, a strong commitment by policy organizations to stakeholder involvement can overcome some of the funding issues and foster effective environmental management. We believe that both elements are essential.

Note

1. A listing of the various stakeholder groups is available on the U.S. EPA project web site, www.epa.gov/hudson.
References


