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Public participation in eco-social policies: exploring mechanisms for bridging the gap

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Introduction

The growing body of research on eco-social policies has put the nexus between environmental and social issues centre stage by highlighting the mutual interdependencies between policy goals in both areas (Mandelli, 2022; Cotta, 2024). When assessing the roles for different actors in eco-social policies and drivers for eco-social transitions, most studies focus on states and government actors (Cotta, 2024). The state is perceived as a 'social and environmental arena' (Koch, 2022, p 2) with the responsibility for action (Lindellee et al, 2021) and with the capacity, functions and competences (Gough, 2013; Krause, 2021) to act as an initiator (Koch, 2020; Bonvin and Laruffa, 2022) or facilitator (Coote, 2022) of eco-social policies. Yet, at the same time it is recognised that 'state "top-down" policies can only be successful in initiating the required ecological and social transformation if they react to and reinforce "bottom-up" mobilizations' (Lindellee et al, 2021, p 330) through, for example, civil society participation, bottom-up civil society mobilisation, or *citizens' co-production of* and *co-participation in* public services (Lindellee et al, 2021; Gough, 2022; Laruffa et al, 2022).

While mostly prescribing what citizens should do, civil society and the public usually play only a rather limited role in the eco-social literature as addressees of public policies or as actors within their individual sphere (Laruffa et al, 2022). Even though public participation plays an important role in both environmental and social policy individually (for example, Lub and Uyterlinde, 2012; Bodin, 2017; Beresford, 2019; Jager et al, 2020), less attention is paid to citizens and stakeholders as potential political agents for navigating the inherent tensions and synergies in eco-social policies and contributing to holistically positive policy outcomes (Lindellee et al, 2021; but see for example, Gough, 2022; Jager and Newig, 2024). Instead, citizens are often seen as producers of public opinion on environmental and social matters (for example, Jakobsson et al, 2018) and as agents of their

individual socio-economic and political activities. When it comes to citizens' *collective action* through civic associations and policy communities, though, research on welfare and social policies, from which the eco-social literature has mostly derived, often assumes a state centralisation that encourages the 'clientelization of welfare' (Fitzpatrick, 2011, p 64) which is passively received by citizens.

Against this backdrop, we explore the potential roles of citizens and stakeholders in eco-social policy and decision making. We chart the academic landscape as to how and through which mechanisms public participation may shape eco-social policies and especially the tensions and coherence between interrelated social and ecological policy goals. We approach this aim by beginning with the literature on collaborative governance (for example, Emerson and Nabatchi, 2015) and environmental policy (for example, Newig et al, 2018), and further include works from the fields of deliberative and participatory democracy (for example, Willis et al, 2022), the recently emerging field of eco-social policy (for example, Laruffa et al, 2022; Hirvilammi et al, 2023) and others to provide a conceptual and exploratory analysis of those mechanisms.

After defining and conceptualising public participation, as well as our operationalisation of eco-social policies, we specify distinct causal pathways through which public participation affects the substance of policy outputs. We will pay specific attention to the trade-offs and coherence between ecological and social policy goals and the ways in which the balance between those may be improved or aggravated by different forms of public participation.

Conceptual background

Public participation can be defined as those 'processes and structures of public decision-making and management that engage actors from the private sector, civil society, and/or the public at large, with varying degrees of communication, collaboration, and delegation of decision power to participants' (Newig et al, 2018, p 273). As our definition already implies, public participation can be split up in three separate analytical dimensions (Fung, 2006):

- *Actor involvement*, that is, *who* is involved? Within this dimension, participatory processes can be distinguished according to their modalities of recruitment (for example, open access, sortition or targeted selection) and participant composition (for example, individual citizens, stakeholders, business).
- *Interaction*, that is, *how* do participants interact? This dimension embraces the manner, direction and intensity of communication flows (for example, direct face-to-face dialogue, deliberation or written consultation) and

the ways in which interests are aggregated (for example, consensus – qualified – majority vote).
- *Influence*, that is, *what* can participants decide? This dimension grasps the extent to which influence is afforded to participants over policy decisions to be taken, ranging from, for example, being merely informed, through the opportunity to voice recommendations and preferences, up to co- and self-governance.

While these dimensions are in principle independent of each other, in reality they may correlate depending on the chosen process formats (Jager et al, 2020). Potential formats range from formalised hearings, different forms of 'mini-publics' (Ryan and Smith, 2014) and mediation processes to long-term institutionalised collaborative regimes (Ansell and Gash, 2007; Scott and Thomas, 2017; Jager, 2023).

These dimensions form the basis for the *causal mechanisms* that we identify here, linking specific traits of public participation to the quality of eco-social policy outcomes. We will explore through which mechanisms public participation addresses trade-off and synergies between ecological and social policy goals. Mechanisms are understood here as providing a 'continuous and contiguous chain of causal or intentional links between the explanans and the explanandum' (Elster [1989] in Hedström and Ylikoski, 2010, p 51). Such mechanisms can involve multiple steps and form causal chains, where intermediate factors mediate the relationship between public participation and eco-social policy outcomes. Intermediate factors might be linked to particular societal process outcomes, such as conflict resolution, capacity building or learning, that in turn become instrumental in shaping the content of eco-social policies (Jager et al, 2020).

The term 'eco-social policy' was developed to indicate a nexus between environmental and social dimensions of public policies (Cotta, 2024), where policies explicitly integrate environmental and social goals (Mandelli, 2022). Such policies can range in their scale and focus, for example, from affecting local land-use decisions up to large EU policy frameworks. One example of the synergetic nature of these policies can be seen in the European Green Deal (EGD) Commission's Communication presented in December 2019. This framework of actions intends to cut greenhouse gas emissions for Europe to become the first carbon-neutral continent by 2050. At the same time, it strives to foster a 'fair and prosperous society' by creating jobs and improving Europeans' quality of life (European Commission, 2019). Hence, the EGD considers environmental and social aspects as interconnected and mutually reinforcing objectives (Mandelli, 2022), not prioritising one over the other. Instead, it recognises the synergetic relation but also potential trade-offs, especially in relation to the EU's energy efficiency and climate policies (European Commission, 2019), which should be taken into consideration.

Participation and eco-social policies

Building on the existing literature, in this section we suggest a first analytical framework linking the different dimensions of public participation to the coherence and trade-offs of policy goals in eco-social policies. The included causal mechanisms are not to be seen as deterministic (nor complete) but reflect existing scholarship on potential causal influences of public participation on the quality of policy decisions. In this vein, the framework should be seen as a collection of mechanisms setting a research agenda for eco-social policy scholarship rather than providing definitive answers. The framework is summarised in Figure 10.1.

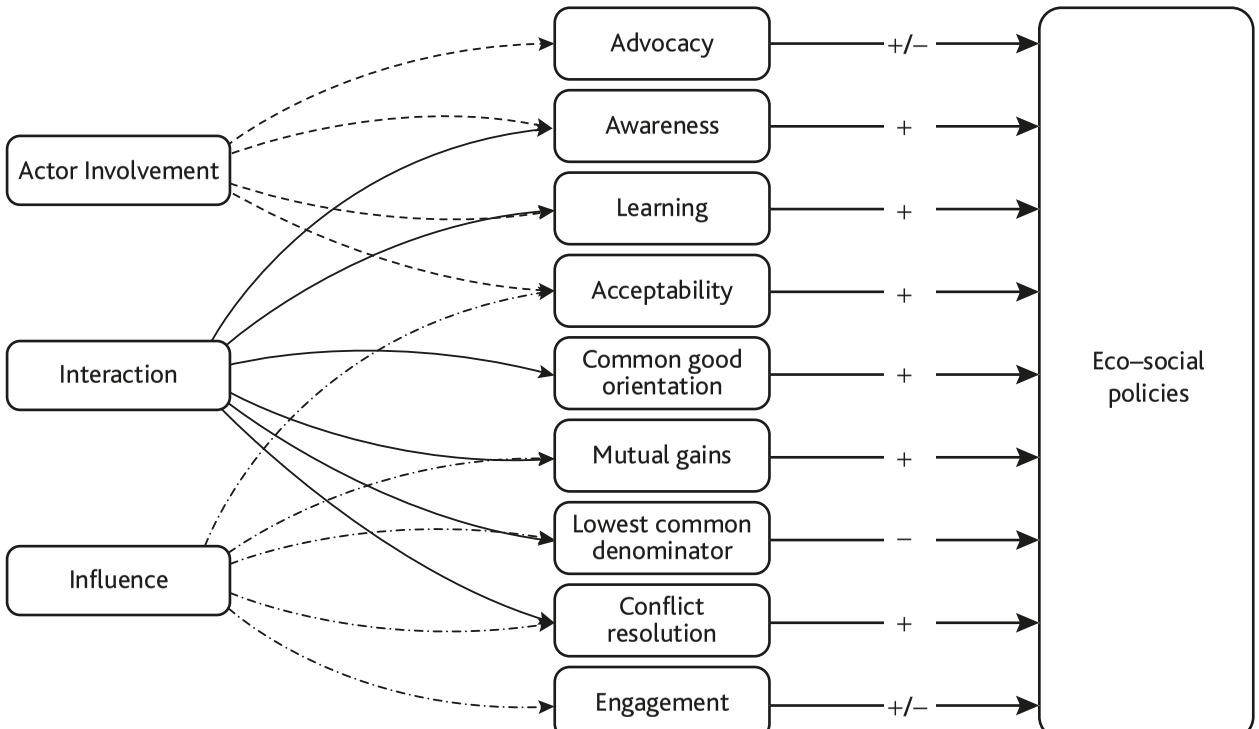
Actor involvement

When addressing the topic of participation in policy making, the first aspect to be considered is the question of who participates and what is their motivation. Potential participants include a wide spectrum that ranges from individual citizens and citizen initiatives, who represent themselves, to various forms of organised interests, such as non-governmental and civil society organisations (NGOs and CSOs), different branches of government and the administration, and multinational companies and business. Main motivations for participation lie in individual cost–benefit calculations (Turner and Weninger, 2005) and the desire for policy influence and change (Börzel, 2005; Bradford, 2020).

Public participation processes are expected to offer opportunities for these actors and their interests to enter the policy processes and shape governance outcomes, especially for those interests that felt marginalised before (Fung, 2006). In this way, their *agency* may have a positive effect on decisions themselves by reflecting this diversity and by including often-underrepresented social and environmental interests (Brody, 2003; Fung, 2006). Additionally, *social acceptability* of decisions may be fostered (Newig et al, 2018), as, for instance, studies on the involvement of local communities in energy transition projects highlight (Lennon et al, 2019). Considering participants as *knowledge holders*, their participation may have positive effects for the quality of decisions (Emerson and Nabatchi, 2015) as they improve the information base by incorporating new and relevant knowledge for addressing the problem at hand (Fischer, 2000). Beyond that, they may contribute to mutual awareness and understanding between stakeholders and responsible authorities (Laird, 1993).

However, eco-social policies may have their intricacies when it comes to actor involvement. *Interest constellations* in eco-social policies can be located in what has been framed as an 'eco-social-growth trilemma' between environmental and social spheres and their link with economic growth

Figure 10.1: Collection of mechanisms linking public participation to eco-social policies



Note: Different line types highlight the influence of the different participatory dimensions: involvement (dashed lines), interaction (solid lines) and influence (dot-dashed lines). The symbols on the arrows denote the direction of the potential impact of each mechanism on the quality and coherence of eco-social policies: positive (+), negative (–) and mixed (+/–).
Source: Authors' elaboration

(Mandelli et al, 2021). As stakeholders may favour one goal over the others, divisive tensions may occur between these interests. These tensions may be aggravated as interests in eco-social policies correlate with other stakeholder characteristics, which ultimately affect representation in participatory venues. Studies on self-interest in welfare public opinion have stressed how people from low- and middle-income groups support welfare and social provisions as they will benefit from them directly (Gugushvili and Otto, 2023). Hence, when acting as participants, these actors often speak directly for themselves and their own material self-interest, such as securing wage earnings and defining employment ethics (Fitzpatrick, 2011). Environmental interests such as around nature preservation or biodiversity conservation, by contrast, are often less tangible and without direct beneficiaries, although they may affect future generations or non-human others (Fitzpatrick, 2011). Studies on eco-social attitudes in Europe highlight how high-income and educated groups support environmental protection policies, together with an increased green activism and electoral support for green parties (Gugushvili and Otto, 2023). At the same time, the constituency promoting environmental interests remains fragmented (Gugushvili and Otto, 2023). Bridging these patterns of interest representation, social status and direct affectedness poses a particular challenge for the participatory process in eco-social policies.

Against this background, previous research highlights the positive potential of equal participation of social and environmental interests for eco-social policy making (Mandelli, 2023). Broad involvement of a diversity of perspectives and their equal and fair exchange might lead to balanced decisions within the eco-social-growth trilemma and improve their acceptability. Yet, if a group has more voice in comparison to another, there is the risk of a political capture and the prioritisation of one aspect over the other in eco-social policy making (Mandelli, 2023). This risk becomes even more prevalent given the characteristics of the various stakeholders and their direct affectedness. Previous studies suggest that if direct self-interest is at stake, these interests might outplay other, more immaterial factors (Newig et al, 2023). Taken together, these aspects highlight the importance of paying close attention to the question of 'who is involved' in order to realise also the potential positive effects of public participation for balanced eco-social policy making.

Interaction

While participants individually may provide additional gains to decision-making processes, participation can also have a multiplication effect in that the interaction of participants yields solutions that could not have been developed by participants individually (Smith, 2003). We describe mechanisms capturing the effects of different kinds of dialogic processes

(that is, negotiation, open dialogue, deliberation and consensus seeking), the types of solutions they can produce (that is, mutual gains, conflict resolution and common good orientation) and their implications for the coherence of policy goals in eco-social policies, both positive and negative.

Intensive communication, usually involving direct face-to-face interaction (Ansell and Gash, 2007), creates the conditions for participants to discover each other's interests, needs and preferences (Emerson and Nabatchi, 2015). Once these become clear, negotiation or bargaining can be instrumental to resolving existing conflicts and discovering common goals and solutions that appear beneficial for all interests (for example, mutual gains or 'win-win' solutions; see Ansell and Gash, 2007). In eco-social policy making, conflict resolution and mutual gains may help to balance social and environmental considerations by identifying a common ground between diverse interests. Negotiation in this respect can be seen as a less ambitious form of interaction – as compared to deliberation – where parties pursue only their self-interest and do not develop a shared value basis or purpose (Newig et al, 2018).

However, negotiation may not always lead to the identification of mutual gains. Particularly under conditions of consensus decision making, but also beyond, discussions among many actors with diverse viewpoints may end up in solutions that can be characterised as *lowest common denominator* or *joint-decision trap* (Scharpf, 1988). Such decisions imply only minimal changes from the status quo (Tsebelis, 1995) and little transformative action to reach eco-social policy goals (Hirvilammi et al, 2023). Public participation in eco-social policies is particularly prone to this hazard, as participation increases the number of potential veto players within the process and includes those actors with different backgrounds and diverse viewpoints, where congruence between positions is potentially lacking.

Interaction in the form of intensive exchange of perspectives and knowledge often sets in motion learning processes, where individuals or groups may gain a better understanding of the policy matter itself, but also of each other's perspectives (Gerlak et al, 2020). Such exchange, especially between very diverse participants, may stimulate innovative ideas and even the transformation of perspectives and values via critical reflection (Emerson and Nabatchi, 2015; Hirvilammi et al, 2023). In the field of eco-social policies, learning may play a role to foster those transformative capacities needed to bring together ambitious ecological and social policy goals and to craft impactful, integrative eco-social policies (Hirvilammi et al, 2023).

The normatively most promising, but also practically most demanding form of interaction is *deliberation* (Newig et al, 2018). Deliberation 'is grounded in an ideal in which people come together, on the basis of equal status and mutual respect, to discuss the political issues they face, and based on those discussions, decide on policies that will affect their lives'

(Bächtiger et al, 2018, p 2). Hence, it strives for a process of collective problem-solving characterised by a safe and protected space for participants and a trustful atmosphere, undistorted by deception, delusion and power play (Dryzek, 1990; Birnbaum, 2016). Under these conditions, participants enter transparent, fair and structured discussions to arrive at considered judgements based on good evidence and rational argumentation (Fung and Wright, 2001). Processes striving for this ideal are expected to produce 'preferences and justifications which are "public-spirited" in nature [because] preferences held on purely self-interested grounds become difficult to defend in a deliberative context' (Smith, 2003, p 63). This 'common good orientation' helps participants to see beyond their initial preferences and to find solutions that are beneficial for the welfare of the community at large. This ideal serves also as a conceptual foundation for the many 'mini-publics' that are currently installed, for example, climate assemblies and citizen juries (see, for instance, Gough, 2022; Willis et al, 2022; Boswell et al, 2023), to tackle some of the most pressing eco-social challenges.

For matters of eco-social policy, deliberation may be instrumental to improving the coherence and quality of policies in two ways (confer Willis et al, 2022). First, the way in which deliberation orientates participants toward the common good opens up the space for consideration of the interests of future generations as well as non-human others (Smith, 2003) and for identifying shared goals and objectives (MacKenzie, 2018). Second, given its fact-regarding nature, deliberation requires the consideration of evidence, but it also recognises that in political reality there may be different sources and forms of evidence beyond technical ones (Willis et al, 2022). Through its egalitarian approach, it explicitly includes moral and ethical considerations and values knowledge held by differently situated actors, for example, those that are particularly vulnerable (Hammond et al, 2020). In this manner, deliberation may be particularly apt to address the double challenge inherent in eco-social policies and contribute to coherent and impactful policy decisions.

Influence

Multiple studies, both in the environmental and social realm, have highlighted the value of granting participants substantial decision-making powers, both as an end in itself and as a tool for achieving high-quality decisions and policies (for example, Newman et al, 2004; Cattino and Reckien, 2021; Newig et al, 2023). Indeed, there is a widely held assumption that genuine and meaningful participation, which actually gives actors a say, should improve decision making (Cattino and Reckien, 2021).

Reasons for this effect may go back to various mechanisms. Sufficient powers to shape decisions and execute influence for many actors may be

a pivotal reason to join a participatory decision-making process in the first place (Fischer and Leifeld, 2015). On the one hand, if a process fails to attract support and buy-in by stakeholders, outputs might become biased and sub-optimal, or processes may be abandoned altogether (Lubell et al, 2023). Additionally, if processes are regarded as merely tokenistic and decisions as pre-given, acceptance of decisions will be lacking (Diduck and Sinclair, 2002). On the other hand, where stakeholders feel empowered by a process, they may be more likely to engage substantially and contribute to finding meaningful solutions (Edelenbos et al, 2011). This may lead to higher decision ownership on the part of the participants, with positive effects for acceptance and implementation of policies (Brody, 2003). The willingness to engage and a feeling of empowerment might play a particular role for eco-social policies. As these policies often involve complex and conflict-prone issues that especially concern vulnerable groups in a society (for example, spatial planning decisions in marginalised communities), such a feeling of being taken seriously and of empowerment can be essential for the participation of these actors (Lub and Uyterlinde, 2012). Their buy-in and engagement in the process, in turn, might be instrumental in reaching a balanced eco-social policy decision that takes all relevant perspectives on board, and which might eventually gain broad acceptance.

Apart from this direct effect, the voice granted to participants may also influence eco-social governance decisions in an indirect way by providing the foundation for meaningful negotiation and conflict resolution. Previous research has emphasised that the resolution of conflicts, and the development of shared understandings and win-win situations, depends on participants having space to explore alternatives and being able to make decisions (Jager et al, 2020). This may appear pertinent in the realm of eco-social policies, where – as outlined above – finding a common ground between different interests and perspectives may be particularly pronounced.

Conclusion

With this chapter, we aimed to provide a first analytical orientation as to which roles public participation of citizens and stakeholders can play in the field of eco-social policies. We relied on the three basic dimensions of participation (Fung, 2006) – actor involvement, interaction and influence – and explored how these dimensions may influence, positively or negatively, the quality and coherence of eco-social policies. In this vein, our chapter may be understood as exploratory. We do not assume that the identified mechanisms are deterministic or work in every case, nor that our collection may be complete; instead, we want to set the agenda and orientate future research to test these mechanisms in the field of eco-social

policies, and to substantiate, adapt, complement or abandon them, based on empirical insights.

When researching these mechanisms, however, it appears important to place them in a broader context and consider some additional points: First, while we explored actor involvement, interaction and influence separately, in reality they appear together in various participatory formats, such as public hearings, citizen juries or round-table discussions. Such formats can be seen as different configurations of these three dimensions of participation, which highlight patterns of co-occurrence and trade-offs between them. For instance, involving a maximum number of participants in an open information event may come at the cost of intensive face-to-face interaction. These patterns and trade-offs are important to specify and consider, as they might imply that some mechanisms may strengthen or weaken each other.

Second, while we aimed to provide a nuanced picture that includes opportunities as well as pitfalls, we mostly highlighted the promising potentials of public participation for realising balanced and high-quality eco-social policies. Yet, this should not put aside the perils and difficulties of participation. Especially around eco-social policy issues, participatory processes might face particularly high levels of conflict, political costs and need for mediation, as compared to more 'mono-topical' issues. But also, on a more general level, public participation may be subject to various hazards. These include the replacement of expertise and reason with public opinion in decision making (Geissel, 2009), the reproduction of inequality and marginalisation and the co-option of participants by powerful interests (Glimmerveen et al, 2022), the slowdown and rise in costs of decision making (Taverne, 2005), distortion of accountability structures (Papadopoulos, 2003) and other pitfalls. Analyses of public participation should bear these in mind and be open for even further ones more specific to the context of eco-social policies, for instance when it comes to the inclusion of vulnerable groups.

Finally, processes of public participation should be seen in the wider policy context in which they are embedded (Font et al, 2018; Laruffa et al, 2022). Eco-social policies often find themselves entrenched in a complex web of decision-making processes dispersed across various levels and following distinct spatial rationales (Domorenok and Trein, 2024). Participation is, thus, usually one aspect within this larger web of public decision-making processes where participatory outputs are considered to a greater or lesser extent (Font et al, 2018). Additionally, public participation alters the relationship between citizens and their political representatives into one that is based on dialogue and interaction rather than one that focuses on elections and voting intention (Mansbridge, 2019; Willis et al, 2022). In this way, public participation plays a role in the wider policy system beyond the immediate decision making and vice versa.

Public participation can surely not guarantee to 'solve' the challenges of eco-social policy making. But the approach deserves closer scrutiny as it

might have the potential to offer political spaces within which the political, moral and epistemological challenges of eco-social policy making may be considered and where collective and balanced action may emerge.

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