Measuring the Success Of Public Involvement

by David Sale, Susan Safford, and Sandra Davis

Public involvement[1] is about people, their perceptions, beliefs, aspirations, knowledge, and understanding, as much (if not more) an art as a science. Perspectives frequently vary about the success of public involvement efforts, often depending on who was involved and whether their needs were met in the process. So how can you measure success in public involvement efforts and what does it mean to be "successful"?

To answer those questions, and get an idea of how to blend the art of facilitating the collection of public perspectives with the science of measurement, we reviewed journal articles and other literature and surveyed public involvement professionals. Our results were presented to the October 2005 International Association for Public Participation (IAP2) conference in Portland, Oregon, USA to elicit ideas and perspectives from our peers. This article summarizes our findings.

The Literature on Measuring Public Involvement

Within the literature about evaluating public involvement, there are theories about measuring success, as well as conceptual and practical critiques. Measuring success in public involvement generally requires asking what is meant by "success", whether there are meaningful and consistent ways of measuring success, and whether it is appropriate (or wise) to attempt such measurement (Evans, 2002). However, developing general principles and practices for measuring the success of public involvement is complicated by a diversity of goals and expectations, differing processes and mechanisms, relative and site or project specific needs and goals, and the inherent richness of context-dependent situations. It is likely that perspectives on effectiveness and results will vary between professional practitioners, community participants, and agency or corporate sponsors.

The framework for measuring success should be clearly defined. Measures of success can be framed, for example, by meta-ethical fairness and competence (Ashford and Rest, 1999), an approach that measures whether a public involvement effort is multi-way, consensual and non-hierarchical; maintains respect for and reinforces citizen autonomy; promotes critical self-reflection, and the direct involvement of "amateurs"; provides the basis or structure for shared collective decision-making; supports distributive or procedural justice; enhances control or equity by participants; or provides for a normative consensus

(Ashford and Rest, 1999). Other ethical criteria have also been suggested for use in design and later evaluation of public involvement, including representativeness (pluralism), impartiality, accountability, confidentiality, transparency, and recognition of promises (English et al., 1993).

Practical criteria for the measurement of public involvement efforts are based on evaluation of participants' goals and expectations. *Process* criteria (evaluating the means or approach) can include accessibility to affect decision making, the diversity of views, opportunities for participation or information exchange, identification and integration of concerns, independence of the facilitator, inclusiveness, adaptability, "amendability", resiliency, and durability. *Outcome-based* success measures can include project or decision acceptability, project efficiency, cost avoidance, mutual learning and respect, improved understanding, the amount of conflict resolution required, the degree of consensus achieved, influence on and participation in decision-making, or participant satisfaction with the results of the process (Ashford and Rest, 1999). Measuring success of *outcomes* is trickier to quantify because of the diversity of preferred results. For example, an agency might consider public support or ease of implementation as an appropriate outcome, while the public might consider the extent to which the community can achieve its goals or alter or block decisions, as better measures of success. In this respect, Evans (2002) makes a critical distinction between measuring the *success of the public involvement program* (or process) *itself and the success of the project (enterprise)* the public involvement program supports.

Pre-established metrics, including performance indicators, benchmarks, and performance standards set beforehand based on key project goals, can help to gain up-front agreement on what to measure, and can be integrated into the project design (Evans 2002; Ashford and Rest, 1999). Establishing performance standards and benchmarks for public involvement provides the advantage of allowing initial agreement on what is important. The setting and measurement of indicators, benchmarks, and performance standards imply a quantitative measure of (often) qualitative information, with which practitioners should always be cautious.

Public or agency satisfaction may not necessarily be a good measure of public involvement success. Coglianese (2002) argues for a focus on effectiveness, efficiency, and equity of the decisions that result from public participation, rather than simply satisfaction. Many public involvement efforts are of short enough duration that public 'opinion' may continue to dominate over public 'knowledge', creating a situation where participant

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[1] In this article we use the term public involvement (PI) broadly, to refer to a process by which individuals and groups come together to communicate, interact, exchange information, and provide input around a set of issues, problems or decisions and to engage in some degree of shared decision-making, in full awareness of the subtle and not-so-subtle differences ascribed to the various terms, participation, engagement, involvement, stakeholder, public and others.

satisfaction may be driven by spur of the moment or deeply held perceptions that can easily change over time (Yankelovich, 1991).

In general, the literature indicates a preference for a mix of process and outcome goals, as well as a mix of tools and techniques. A number of factors are key in developing an effective public involvement process that can attain the goals of the sponsor and address the expectations of participants. These include early involvement, inclusiveness, two-way communication, adequate information and resources, an appropriate degree of citizen control, incentives and/or compensation, agency clarity, openness, and management commitment, development of trust, prior community experience, agreement on goals, and going beyond legal minimums (Ashford and Rest, 1999).

A Survey of Public Involvement Practitioners

Scholarly literature is most helpful when combined with the real world experience of practitioners. We conducted an on-line survey to find out whether practitioners thought it important to measure success, whether they measured success themselves, what measurement tools and techniques they used, and how they thought that the effort could be improved (see box for survey details). We also gathered feedback from other public involvement practitioners at the IAP2 2005 Annual Conference[2].

Measuring Success

The majority of survey respondents (88 percent) thought that it was important to measure the success of public involvement efforts for a variety of reasons:

- knowing whether efforts have been effective or worth the time;
- providing return on investment to clients;
- avoiding litigation;
- learning from and improving techniques;
- monitoring progress;
- garnering more funding;
- achieving desired outcomes;
- fulfilling "contract(s)" with the public;
- knowing/understanding public opinion;
- determining if all sectors of the public have been involved;
- resolving differences between clients' and practitioners' goals for public involvement;
- showing people how their involvement helped the process;
- establishing credibility of results.

Respondents who replied it was not important to measure success focused on problems inherent to "quantifying" success in public involvement efforts, because measuring accurately and effectively would be too difficult, or that results would be too subjective to be meaningful.

Two-thirds of the respondents (65 percent) have actually measured the success of public involvement efforts. Most of the thirty-five percent (35 percent) of respondents who have not measured success mentioned a lack of funding, time or staff, while others did not know how to measure success effectively (which tools to use), were not in a position to measure, cited a lack of agency or client interest (or actual resistance), or were not required to measure.

The Survey
The survey was designed and administered through SurveyMonkey.com. A link to the survey was sent through a number of mailing lists, including IAP2 (for public involvement professionals), the Planning Association of Washington and the Western Planner (for planners and public officials), the American Association of Port Authorities, and the Health Education Directory (for health professionals). We received eighty-one (81) responses out of a potential pool of approximately 1500 people (5 percent). Seventy-eight (78) percent of the respondents consider themselves to be public involvement professionals, with 73 percent having more than 5 years of experience, and 58 percent with more than 10 years. The professional foci of respondents was primarily on environmental and planning areas, with others including public works, public health, transportation, natural resources, ports, recycling, and biosolids.

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2 The interest in this topic was highlighted by the attendance of nearly 30 people for the last session of the three-day conference.

Public Involvement

Defining & Measuring Success

Respondents defined and measured success in varied ways. Many focused on quantitative descriptions (e.g., numbers of participants, contacts, or comments). Others focused on more qualitative aspects, including project success (successful plans), buy-in/buy-off by the stakeholders, process flexibility, effective communications (consistency of messages and continuity as well as level of participation), changes in knowledge, attitudes, behavior, or organizational capacity, policy or participation, and the democracy of the process (fair, open,). Early and ample opportunities to participate, and impact decisions was an important metric of public involvement, highlighted as well during the dialogue at the IAP2 conference.

Benchmarks or Standards

An effective way of measuring success is to develop performance standards or benchmarks at the beginning of the project, and then to measure success against their attainment. Almost ninety percent (89.7 percent) of the respondents who had measured success did so by measuring outcomes or public satisfaction, while just over half (59 percent) actually set standards or benchmarks.

The standards or benchmarks used included quantitative measures such as numeric standards for number of people reached, unit costs, percent of people understanding messages, quantity of effort, and the number of comments received. More qualitative benchmarks and standards included narrative evaluations of success (event summaries); goals based on initial surveys of satisfaction, knowledge, attitude, or understanding; positive or negative comments in the media; and measures of satisfaction with the opportunities to participate in or influence the process, or with communications.

These standards or benchmarks were developed in a variety of ways, ranging from "by guess and by golly," to more rigorous methods, such as establishing goals based on initial attitudinal or awareness surveys, standard educational tools, previous benchmarks, developing collaboration on outcomes with project teams, staff, stakeholders, and clients, or by relying on IAP2 and other standards for evaluating success[3].

Public Involvement Tools that Contribute to Success

To get an idea of what tools and techniques public involvement practitioners feel contribute to success, we asked respondents to rank a number of techniques. Based on our experience and the literature, we included public hearings/ meetings, advisory committees, surveys, focus groups, juries and reviews, alternative dispute resolution/formal mediation,

dialogue processes, web-based tools, open houses, newsletters, personal interviews/meetings in person, presentations, scenario/visioning processes, and expert meetings and workshops. Respondents added and ranked other tools, including graphics and written brochures, structured decision processes, relationship building, media relations, electronic communications, and direct education/experience (such as boat tours).

There was great breadth in the number of different tools viewed by practitioners as likely to lead to success, but some patterns emerged. Respondents ranked 11 of the 14 listed tools as very important or important, two as less important or not important and only one as of unknown importance. Very important tools include advisory committees, personal interviews/meetings, presentations, open houses and dialogue processes. No single very important tool stood out as the most likely to bring success. Rather, the common key characteristic is active discussion and two-way exchange of information with participants. Several of the tools viewed as very important to success also share a common characteristic of being on-going activities that build relationships over time rather than one-time events.

Tools viewed as important included focus groups, newsletters, expert meetings and workshops, public hearings and meetings, presentations and Web-based tools. The tools ranked important also involve information exchange but differ from the very important tools in that the information exchange is somewhat less active. There is less of an opportunity to tailor the type and amount of information to the interests or concerns of the participant.

Finally, those tools viewed as less important to success included surveys and scenario/visioning processes. Alternative dispute resolution and formal mediation were not deemed important, and most respondents did not know the importance of juries and reviews.

Goals and Objectives That Are Important for Success in Public Involvement

Finally, we wanted to understand the goals and objectives of a public involvement effort that are considered important to success. The goal most frequently cited as important was educating decision-makers (76 percent), closely followed by goals of building trust (73 percent), and educating the public (71 percent). Other values included incorporating public values into decisions (68 percent), improving the quality of decisions (65 percent), and incorporating public knowledge into decisions (52 percent). Less highly considered goals included resolving conflict (37 percent), and avoiding lawsuits (25 percent). Other goals and objectives mentioned by the respondents (11 percent) included transparency and directing behavioral change of the public to achieve more sustainability.

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3 Interestingly, there was a general agreement by participants during the dialogue at the IAP2 conference with a statement that IAP2 standards are rarely used by them in evaluating public involvement.

Conclusion: Measuring Success in Public Involvement Efforts

Measuring the success of public involvement techniques, processes or projects can provide valuable feedback to practitioners, project proponents, and the public. Yet, while there seems to be general agreement that measuring the success or effectiveness of public involvement is important, actually measuring success does not seem to be a broadly applied practice, possibly due to added costs, concerns over the appropriateness or applicability of different metrics, a lack of understanding of the tools and techniques, or other reasons.

By addressing a few fundamental questions at the beginning of a project, practitioners can gain insight on tailoring public involvement efforts to increase the potential for those efforts to be deemed successful from a variety of perspectives and to guide and frame the selection of measures, the measurement methods, and even the definition of success. The questions include:

- Why measure the success of public involvement efforts? What are the purpose and goals?
- Should you measure success or effectiveness of your efforts? Are they the same?
- Does the public, the client, or the practitioner define success criteria and metrics ? What does it mean to be unsuccessful?
- Does it take a majority of stakeholders to agree on success?
- How do you measure success? What techniques are available? What metrics are appropriate?
- What are the factors that are likely to result in successful public involvement?

Developing an appropriate measurement approach and metrics that address these questions can be aided by a few general principles:

- Measurement of success in public involvement needs to be customized to the particular public involvement effort.
- Measures of public involvement should include benchmarks, indicators or performance standards, agreed to up front by all participants, and then measured at different points along the project path.
- Measures of satisfaction should be used with caution and paired with other types of measures to avoid conflicting interpretations of project participants and sponsors.
- Both quantitative and qualitative measures should be used in a balanced approach.
- The public involvement tools that seem to work the best are those that promote dialogue andface-to-face communication.

There was general agreement among attendees at the IAP2 conference session that there is a need for additional research, possibly training, and an ongoing professional dialogue about how and when to measure success in public involvement efforts. Developing reasonable and appropriate metrics that balance qualitative and quantitative methods - the science with the art - can strengthen the integration of public involvement with project goals and broaden the acceptance of the role of public involvement in decision-making.

David Sale is a Systems Ecologist at ECO Resources. He is a member of IAP2 and can be reached at daves@ecoresourcegroup.com or 206-855-0590. Sandra Davis is a Senior Strategist and Managing Partner at ECO Resources. Sandra can be reached at sandra@ecoresourcegroup.com or 206-855-0590. Susan Safford is a consultant with Jones & Stokes. Susan is a member of IAP2 and can be reached at ssafford@jsanet.com or 503-248-9507. The views expressed in this article are her own and not those of Jones & Stokes.

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