

Book reviews

Helpful handy guide for effective community engagement

Angus Morrison-Saunders

Realizing Community Futures: A Practical Guide to Harnessing Natural Resources by J Vanclay, R Prabhu and F Sinclair
Earthscan, London, 2006, 162 pages, £14.99, ISBN 1-84407-383-1

This short (162 pages) and simply written book provides a practical guide, based on actual experience, on how to engage stakeholders in the development of a shared vision for sustainable development and its implementation. Although not specifically targeted at an impact assessment audience, the process espoused in *Realizing Community Futures* is virtually identical to the early stages of sustainability, integrated or strategic environmental assessments in terms of identifying issues and strategic objectives, coming up with alternative means to address these issues, achieve the objectives and then selecting the preferred option based on an assessment process (see, for example Thérivel, 2004; Pope and Grace, 2006).

In this book, however, slightly different terminology is used to this and the emphasis is on natural-resource management issues that can be addressed by a community irrespective of any formal impact assessment process (importantly the authors note that many socio-environmental problems are insidious and ongoing warranting some intervention but there are no new development proposals involved that would traditionally trigger impact assessment).

Specifically, as stated in the Preface, the aim of the book is to present a practitioner's 'how to' guide for engaging a community to:

- reflect a vision into various scenarios;
- realize a scenario into reality;
- reconcile multiple and often conflicting perspectives; and
- recognise, evaluate and select among trade-offs.

The chapters are set out in a linear fashion to walk the reader carefully through the various steps in achieving these four outcomes. Importantly, in the final pages of the book, the authors acknowledge that in real life progress is not linear and that a spiral pattern is likely to (and should) occur in practice, the idea being that each iteration takes participants to a higher level of insight, information or analysis than the previous time that step was visited. They also make it clear that their approach is "just one tool in the toolbox of action research" (page 141) but they encourage the reader to learn from their applications and to work out for themselves where it can best be used.

The first step in the process is to identify whatever problem is going to be addressed and to frame it in terms of a shared understanding held by the relevant stakeholders, ensuring that none is excluded and that the naturally diverse interests in resource management matters are all accounted for. The importance of having a good facilitator is noted and the authors identify five particular roles that practitioners should emulate order to facilitate the process properly. The second step is to develop a shared vision built around the six elements of the desired future, the current context, strategies of how to get from the current context to the desired future, key resources and influences, the actors necessary to realize the strategy and the indicators or 'levers to pull' that will influence progress towards the vision.

Somewhat to my surprise (having initially read the blurb and Preface to the book) several chapters are devoted to a modelling approach as the means for translating the visioning into alternative strategies

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and then to evaluate these alternatives to determine the way forward. This model includes software that can be downloaded from a website or supplied on CD Rom upon request. Whilst the model process is carefully and clearly explained, including the value of having a visual rather than textual approach to convey the visioning process, for me it would be necessary to try to apply the process in a real-life situation before being able to judge how useful it is.

One point I did appreciate was the emphasis the authors placed on having stakeholders develop the model for themselves in their own terms and in accordance with their own understanding of the situation. Whilst experts can, and should, provide input to the process, stakeholders remain engaged throughout the process. Furthermore, modelling enables various scenarios to be explored, including disasters, so that, when it comes to real-life application, effective pathways can be chosen that participants are confident will work.

The book is written in simple terms and is frequently repetitive in often overlapping stories and explanations. As an academic, I could imagine the content of this book being conveyed efficiently and

effectively in a single journal article. However, the book is aimed at a general audience and its clear, non-academic tone and approach makes for easy reading. For example, most chapters start with extracts from famous poems, speeches or texts and/or case-study accounts in 'story-telling' fashion, while the methodology is carefully and systematically explained in non-technical terms. Additionally, the text is accompanied by photographs (usually of the actual people from the case studies), figures, tables and boxes that helpfully explain or add value to the messages conveyed in the text.

For practitioners looking for a handy guide or 'recipe' book for effective community engagement in strategic or sustainability related decision-making, I think this book will be very helpful.

References

- Pope, J and W Grace 2006. Sustainability assessment in context: issues of process, policy and governance. *Journal of Environmental Assessment, Policy and Management*, 8(1), 373–398.
- Thérivel, R 2004 *Strategic Environmental Assessment in Action*. London: Earthscan.

Idiosyncratic but useful

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***A Primer on Environmental Decision-making: an Integrative Quantitative Approach* by K Seip and F Wenstop**

Springer, Dordrecht Netherlands, 2006, 496 pages, US\$149, ISBN 978-1-4020-4073-3

I feel compelled to start by stating that this is a strange book, but not in a bad way. I think it is just idiosyncratic, as is evidenced by the seemingly out of place faded photograph of children dressed in party costumes on the front cover.

Putting initial impressions aside, this book certainly 'grew' on me. As a student of environmental decision-making, I found parts 1 and 2 to be especially useful. Possibly for the first time, I have found a clear exposition of the basic concepts associated with the making of complex environmental decisions. The only drawback of this excellent beginning is the implication that environmental decision-making is descriptively rational. Clearly this is not the

case and, for the sake of newcomers to environmental policy, I would have liked the authors to have stressed that the rational approach to decision-making is a normative construct only.

Chapter 2 especially took my fancy, with an elegant exposition of a seven-step rational decision analysis process. Each step is allocated an "activity" and a "deliverable". This is where we are first introduced to concepts such as "goal hierarchies", "consequence tables", "utility functions", and "weights". These are all concepts that get the blood running for diehard decision analysts.

Chapters 3 to 11 of the book extend this seven-step process, and examine complex aspects of ethics and value elicitation in an easy to understand style. To my mind, these first two parts are worthy of the price alone. I would have loved to see the book then take off and examine decision-aiding techniques in a lot more detail. Unfortunately, this does not happen. Instead, it takes a somewhat strange turn, and deals extensively with scientific models used in impact prediction in differing environmental components (for example, soil, water, air).

This second half of the book (parts 3 and 4) is like an entirely different text. It bears almost no relation

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