Beyond the hindrances: experiences of public consultations and the possibility of ethics and relevance in participation

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Abstract

Public consultations are increasingly used in projects with environmental impact, allegedly as a way to ensure that affected people and communities have their concerns recognised and addressed. There have been multiple criticisms of this form of public participation, with consultations frequently viewed as a tokenistic practice. In this study, we focus on a public consultation on extra-high voltage power lines projected to go from northern Portugal to northwestern Spain. We analyse citizens' discourses regarding hindrances to participation as well as envisaged possibilities to improve it. The study draws on semi-structured interviews with 26 people and five focus groups discussions (N=37) carried out in localities in the north of Portugal that would be affected by the project. Based on citizens' narrated experiences of participation we discuss the relevance and the ethics of participation in access, standing and influence in public consultations processes.

Keywords

consultation; discourses; ethics; public participation; relevance

Para além dos obstáculos: experiências de consultas públicas e a possibilidade de ética e relevância na participação

Resumo

O procedimento de consulta pública tem sido, cada vez mais, utilizado em projetos com impacto ambiental, supostamente como uma forma de assegurar que as preocupações e sugestões das pessoas e das comunidades interessadas e afetadas pelos projetos são tidas em conta. No entanto, esta forma de participação pública tem vindo a ser bastante criticada, por ser uma prática meramente simbólica e sem consequências concretas. Neste artigo, apresentamos um estudo focado no processo de consulta pública relativo ao projeto de construção de uma linha de muita alta tensão entre o Norte de Portugal e a Galiza (Espanha). Especificamente, analisamos discursos de cidadãos relativamente às barreiras à sua participação pública, bem como diversas

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recomendações para desenvolvimento de processos de consulta pública éticos e relevantes. A análise apresentada é baseada em entrevistas semiestruturadas a 26 pessoas e em cinco grupos focais (N=37) realizados em quatro localidades do Norte de Portugal. A partir dos discursos sobre as diversas experiências de participação, discutimos significados de ética e relevância nas questões de acesso, legitimidade e influência em processos de consulta pública.

Introduction

Over the last decades, public participation has increasingly become a popular mechanism for policy-makers to involve the broader public in decision-making processes. Public participation has been placed within a participatory space opened up "from above" and "by invitation" (Cornwall, 2002), and defined as the process of involving members of the public, so they can have a say in the formulation, adoption and/or implementation of governmental or corporate agendas (Fishkin, 2009; Rowe & Frewer, 2004). It involves one or more forms of interaction between the government (or other formally responsible actors) and the public (O'Faircheallaigh, 2010), and implies that the public's input will be taken into account in policy-making decisions (Rowe & Frewer, 2000, 2004). Like other forms of participation (e.g., Carpentier, 2012; Ekman & Amnã, 2012), public participation is a complex and contested term (Rowe & Frewer, 2004). A comprehensive approach should recognise that public participation knows different levels and formats, and it can best be seen as a continuum, with the highest levels corresponding to full citizen control of the participation process and outcomes (Arnstein, 1969)[1]. Public consultations are one of the most common forms of public participation (Kaehne & Taylor, 2016; Senecah, 2004), but despite the extensive literature on the topic, there is little evidence that consultations are allowing citizens to influence decision-making processes (Kaehne & Taylor, 2016; van Damme & Brans, 2012). Instead, most consultations have functioned as top-down processes and a pro-forma mode of participation made available to affected communities (e.g., Hendry, 2004; Martin, 2007).

Answering the question "what is good public participation?" is a key quest and a long row of studies has attempted to systematise the ingredients to successful public participation (e.g., Rowe & Frewer, 2000, 2004; Rowe, Horlick-jones, Walls, Poortinga & Pidgeon, 2008; Webler & Tuller, 2006). Most of those studies, however, disregard people's voices and experiences of participation in public consultations processes. We argue that it is crucial to understand what people think, feel, and want from public participation (Webler & Tuler, 2006) so that it may be possible to develop ethical and relevant public

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[1] Information also retrieved from https://www.iap2.org/page/about

participation processes (Fox & Murphy, 2012)[2]. This study addresses possibilities of ethics and relevance in public consultations inspired by critical approaches to the ethics of care (e.g., Scourfield & Burch, 2010; Tronto, 2010) and previous recommendations for ethical public participation processes (Fox & Murphy, 2012)[3].

We examine a public consultation launched in 2013 on extra-high voltage power lines (EHVPL) that were projected to go from Vila do Conde, a town in northwestern Portugal, to Fontefria, in Galicia, northwestern Spain. EHPVL were planned to transport 400 kv, the maximum that is normally projected (but rather uncommon nonetheless). They would require exceptionally high towers of up to 75 metres and safety strips nearly 100 metres wide for an extension of several hundred kilometres in Portugal alone. The projected route would cross an area that is quite mixed including forest, small-scale agriculture and various types of settlements. Towns appear to have mainly been spared in the projected route but a number of villages and dispersed residential areas would be directly cut through. According to the Portuguese law (Decree-Law No. 69/2000 and changes introduced by Decree-Law No. 197/2005), projected aerial power lines with voltage equal or above 220kv, over 15 km long and having substations with power lines above 110kv, are required to carry out an Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) (Decree-Law No. 69/2000, Annex 1, 19). The public consultation procedure "aims to collect opinions, suggestions and other contributions of the concerned public about each project subject to EIA" (Decree-Law No. 197/2005, article 2, f). The "concerned public" are the "holders of subjective rights or legally protected interests in the context of decisions taken within the administrative procedure of the EIA, as well as the public affected or susceptible of being affected by that decision, including environmental NGO" (Decree-Law No. 197/2005, article 2, r).

The Portuguese State determined that the public consultation on the EHVPL project would be open for a period of 30 to 50 days and the chosen format was the submission of written comments by the public. Part of the EIA could be consulted in the town halls of affected municipalities and parishes. City and parish councils, associations, companies, political parties and individuals submitted 178 contributions (Lusa, 2015). Additionally, local communities contested the project (in some cases with transnational mobilization in Portugal and Spain), through demonstrations, protests, and a boycott to elections for the European Parliament. It is unclear what influence people's participation had on the project's temporary suspension as per decision of State authorities (at the time of writing a final decision had not yet been publicized).

Our analysis focuses on people' discourses regarding access, standing and influence (Senecah, 2004) in the consultation process. What are the hindrances in public consultations? What might constitute an "ethical" and relevant public consultation process? What does this mean for the people? What role may consultations play in bringing

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[2] Information also retrieved from https://www.iap2.org/page/about

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about participation? Ultimately, this study aims to go beyond the analysis of what is "wrong" in public consultations processes, and seek to envision possibilities to rescue participation, even in formal and traditional forums. By approaching these issues from the narrated experiences of the people called upon to participate, we reflect on wider issues regarding the relevance and the ethics of public participation.

Relevance and ethics of public participation

Scholarship on participation is split between those emphasizing a decline on the levels of conventional forms of participation (e.g., Amnå & Ekman, 2014; Dassonneville & Hooghe, 2018; Putnam, 2000) and those focusing on the emergence of non-conventional forms of participation in the political arena (e.g., Dalton, 2008, 2015; Norris, 2002, 2011). Central to this debate is the idea that participation is a vital principle in democracy, which can only be realised through active engagement of citizens in political decision-making processes (Fishkin, 2009). Placed at the "the heart of political equality" (Verba, 2003, p. 663), participation should provide the means for citizens to have an equal voice in governmental decisions to the extent necessary to maintain the democratic system and ensure its quality (Verba, 2003; Verba, Schlozman, & Brady, 1995). Despite the fact that public participation has been considered intrinsically a good thing, with many benefits being described elsewhere (e.g., Stewart & Sinclair, 2007), the design and implementation process of specific public participation programs remains highly controversial (e.g., Arnstein, 1969; Hendry, 2004; O'Faircheallaigh, 2010). In particular, many concerns have been raised concerning the "usefulness", "effectiveness" or "productiveness" of public participation processes in improving decision-making and/or improving community relationships (Rowe et al., 2008; Rowe & Frewer, 2000, 2004; Senecah, 2004). A criteria-focused approach suggests that public participation processes must be evaluated through pre-determined standards related to acceptance and process-related criteria (Rowe et al., 2008; Rowe & Frewer, 2000, 2004). Whilst acceptance criteria depend on the level of representativeness, independence, influence and transparency, process-related criteria involve how the task is defined, the accessibility of resources, the structure of decision-making and the cost-effectiveness balance (Rowe et al., 2008; Rowe & Frewer, 2000, 2004).

By proposing that acceptance and process criteria are universal, such approaches to public participation ignore the importance of subjective experiences of participation and the role of contextual variables. In this regard, based on people's views, Webler and Tuler (2006) have argued that the public often holds un-consensual discourses about what should be a meaningful participation process. Some of the points of disagreement relate to what Baker and Chapin (2018) claim to be contextual variables influencing public participation, namely power distribution, leadership, trust, transparency and political openness.

Although there has been a considerable shift towards a more comprehensive approach to public participation, most studies still privilege instrumental impacts. Indeed, very few studies have examined public participation processes per se, especially from the perspective of lay people. Senecah's (2004) "practical theory" of Trinity of Voice (TOV) looked at those processes by focusing on access, standing and influence. In this theory, access, standing and influence must be guided by "an on-going relationship of trust building to enhance community cohesiveness and capacity" (Senecah, 2004, p. 23). This calls for the analysis of how people speak about their opportunities to express choices and opinions (access); the civic legitimacy of the process, including the respect, esteem and consideration that people's voices receive (standing); and the impact that those voices have on the decision-making process (influence). In our view, TOV represents an interesting move towards the "process" rather the "product" of participation (Davies, 2001), and provides a relevant structure to analyse the ethics of participation in public consultations.

Aiming to ensure purpose and influence in public consultations processes (Baker & Chapin, 2018; Davies, 2001; Fox & Murphy, 2012; Senecah, 2004), codes of ethics have been advanced towards improving practices of public participation. The International Association of Public Participation[4], for example, proposed a code of ethics to guarantee the purpose, trust and credibility of the process, transparency and openness to the public, access to the process, and respect for communities. Existing ethical standards, however, are essentially a list of aspirational principles that must "be owned by those who generally have greater power" (Fox & Murphy, 2012, p. 212), and guide their experts' interventions (Conrad, Cassar, Christie & Fazey, 2011)[5].

Ethics in public consultations is also about challenging power relations (Cornwall, 2002), as a way to ensure that people have their concerns recognised and addressed through democratic decision-making processes (e.g., O'Faircheallaigh, 2010). Thus, the entity leading the consultation should be responsible for ensuring no ethics violation such as "lying, breaking promises, and manipulation; inviting an exchange with the public but then failing to follow through with the agency portion of the exchange; and fostering participation that is not equipped to lead to wiser decisions" (Fox & Murphy, 2012, p. 212). This necessarily involves considering the needs, contributions, and views of all different actors involved in the process. In Senecah's terms (2004), it would mean providing opportunities of access, standing and influence. Furthermore, it also involves looking at public consultations as spaces of (de)politicization through which political subjectivities may (or not) emerge, gain a voice and get recognition (Krause & Schramm, 2011). In a context of politicized public participation, citizens would have opportunities for political agency (Carvalho, Wessel, & Maeseele, 2016), and for debating different choices and alternatives (Pepermans & Maeseele, 2016).

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[4] Information retrieved from https://www.iap2.org/page/about

[5] Information also retrieved from https://www.iap2.org/page/about

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Inspired by the mentioned proposals (e.g., Fox & Murphy, 2012; Krause & Schramm, 2011; Senecah, 2004; Tronto, 2010)[6], we consider that ethics in public participation is ensured when: processes of access, standing and influence are perceived as transparent and trustworthy by all involved actors; the concerned public have participation opportunities and accessible resources and tools; the views and opinions of the public are considered in the decision-making process; power is equally shared, and the community has real power to influence all phases of the process; and finally, all concerned people have fair and equal access to the public participation process.

A discursive approach to public consultation will allow us to examine these aspects. Looking at the ethics of public consultation in practices of access, standing and influence (Senecah, 2004) from the perspective of lay people constitutes a novel approach to public participation. Although several studies suggested the need to establish ethical standards for public participation (Fox & Murphy, 2012; Rowe & Frewer, 2004)[7], very few have analysed public consultation from an ethical and discursive perspective, or from the perspective of the concerned citizens.

Methodological design and implementation

Based on a qualitative multi-method study, this article analyses data from 15 individual interviews and five group interviews with local inhabitants; and five focus discussion groups with 37 people. Data was collected between March and May 2014. The option of using both focus groups and interviews opens the space for the analysis of discourses on experiences of public participation as well as on possibilities of political action in public consultations processes (Häkli & Kallio, 2014).

Interviews

Interviews were carried out in four localities that would be affected by the extra-high voltage power line project: Barcelinhos (county of Barcelos), Gemieira (Ponte de Lima), Ribeira (Ponte de Lima), and Monção (Monção). The first three are villages located not very far from the small towns that name the counties; the last one is the town itself.

We interviewed 15 people individually and five groups of two to three people (amounting to a total of 26 people), with an average duration of 16 minutes (one person was both interviewed individually and as part of a group). Interviews of this convenience sample (Etikan, Musa & Alkassim, 2016) were conducted predominantly in public spaces such as cafés, gardens and squares (a few took place in other types of public space – a shop, a hotel and a parish town hall). Inhabitants were approached face to face by the researchers and invited to participate in the study in those "natural" spaces. Participants

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[6] Information also retrieved from https://www.iap2.org/page/about

[7] Information also retrieved fromhttps://www.iap2.org/page/about

were recruited because they were available at a given time and revealed willingness to participate (Etikan et al., 2016). Given the continuing importance of physical meeting spaces as "public spheres" in small villages and towns, we addressed those that inhabit the localities affected by the extra-high voltage power line project in order to capture sociabilities and dynamics of those localities in some (although necessarily limited) ways. As we encountered both individuals and small groups, we decided to carry out interviews in both formats (individually and in small group). Although posing different challenges to interviewers and analysts, individuals and natural groups allowed us to collect discourses produced in various formats of interaction.

Our sample is predominantly male (18 males, seven females) and predominantly elderly (estimated average age – 54). Gender distribution may reflect the population that spends time in village public spaces, such as cafés and squares, and so does the age distribution. Although somewhat biased by the fact that most interviews took place during working hours, the average age reflects the demographics of many Portuguese villages and small towns, which have for long suffered from a significant exodus towards cities, where most work opportunities are found.

The first few questions that we posed were aimed at "breaking the ice" and, simultaneously, understanding the connection of interviewees to the community ("Are you originally from Barcelinhos?"; "How long have you lived here for?"; "Do you like it here?"). Next, we asked participants about their experiences of civic/political participation, for example about issues concerning the local community, their perceptions and motives for participating. The next questions focused on the sense of political influence (e.g. "Do you think that citizens can have political influence on the issues affecting their communities? In what way?"). After those questions we asked participants about their knowledge of the extra-high voltage power lines and about the public consultation procedure as well as their participation in it (e.g. "Have you heard about this power line project?"; "Have you heard about the public consultation procedure?"; "Did you participate?"). Subsequently we asked participants if they could recall situations in which citizens' interventions led to policy changes or had no effect. The final questions concerned attribution of responsibility for deciding about environmental issues such as power lines ("Who in your opinion is in charge of deciding matters such as this one?"; "Who do you think should have that responsibility?").

Focus group discussions

We also conducted several focus group discussions in order to approach people's experiences in a manner complementary to interviews. We were interested in capturing processes of social interaction and influence, which our spontaneous small group interviews confirmed as important and productive for research. By "recreating" some of the dynamics of social groups, focus group discussions offer hints into those processes.

Focus group discussions took place in some of same parishes as the interviews and in others with similar characteristics, namely Barcelinhos (county of Barcelos - two focus groups); Tangil (Monção); Ribeira (Ponte de Lima); and Refóios (Ponte de Lima) (one focus group in each locale). Focus groups had six to eight participants each, amounting to a total of 37 people, and discussion sessions occurred in June and July 2014 (average duration of one hour and 27 minutes). Participants were recruited through civic organizations or local associations (e.g., environmental non-governmental organization, sports group, scouts), thus using naturally existing groups. The participating individuals shared specific characteristics in common, as proposed by Krueger and Casey (2015), and were recruited because they lived or work in the affected localities. We mapped those groups via internet searches and then contacted them via email and phone with the invitation to collaborate. Each civic organization recruited the participants for the focus group session further to our request to include diverse profiles in terms of gender, age and profile of involvement with the organizations.

The sample was again predominantly male (27 males, 10 females) but younger than in the interviews (18-25 years old: seven participants; 26-35: nine participants; 36-50: 16 participants; 51-65: four participants; over 65: one participant). Twenty nine participants inhabited in the parishes where the sessions took place and eight worked or had some other meaningful connection to the place. Focus group discussions aimed at understanding: a) whether participants were aware of and had participated in the public consultation process; b) participants' views about the impacts of the extra-high voltage power lines; c) who should conduct the public consultation process; d) who should be in charge of disseminating information and what should be the chosen media; e) the appropriate duration of the public consultation process; f) means for citizen participation; g) how citizens' views should be taken into account; h) how a decision should be made further to the consultation. Two moderators guided the focus groups. One moderator focused on the topics relevant to the discussion and the other on the group dynamics (e.g., body language, unequal participation). During the sessions, both moderators encouraged all participants to share their opinions and experience. For example, when a specific participant was quiet, the moderator directly asked for his/her views about the topic being discussed. Moderators also encouraged participants to share dissenting or conflicting voices.

Analysis of citizens' discourses

In this section, we present an analysis of the interviews and the focus groups discussions. The structure is based on a thematic analysis of the data guided by the notions of access, standing and influence proposed by Senecah (2004), which we conducted with the help of NVivo. Inspired by various strands of Critical Discourse Studies (Fairclough & Wodak, 2006) and Positive Discourse Analysis (Hughes, 2018) we analysed citizens' discourses on the factors that may constrain their participation, as well as on the conditions

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for public participation processes that may be relevant and ethical. Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) "combines critique of discourse and explanation of how it figures within and contributes to the existing social reality, as a basis for action to change that existing reality in particular respects" (Fairclough, 2014). In other words, CDA encompasses the study of texts as well as how they relate to social practices, processes and structures, and has emancipatory goals. Whereas most scholarship has focused only on discourses that produce discrimination, power abuse and/or oppression, Positive Discourse Analysis (e.g., Hughes, 2018) explicitly looks at language practices that counter social problems and that suggest possibilities for improvement. In this article, we complemented the analysis of citizen's feelings of disempowerment and exclusion with an examination of the strategies proposed to address perceived deterrents to public participation.

Narratives of exclusion: Lack of access, information and knowledge

Nearly all participants spoke about lack of information on the impacts of the EH-VPL as well as on the consultation process. Indeed, the most frequently – and arguably most crucial – factor mentioned to explain non-participation in the consultation was lack of information about the fact that it took place. Most citizens suggested that it is not their fault that they did not know about it. In Monção, Manuel, José and Armando offered the following account:

> Manuel – No one heard about it around here...
> Interviewer – And you, Sir, did you not hear about the public consultation either?
> José – Nothing, nothing. What consultation? Nothing, nothing.
> Armando – There was no public consultation. Even though they say there was. (Group interview, Monção)

Manuel generalizes his lack of information and speaks for the whole of the population in the region. The very implementation of the public consultation is questioned by José and explicitly refuted by Armando who casts doubts onto the honesty of the organizers of the process. Besides, the use of vague expressions such as "they", implicitly, creates a confrontational "we" the people, in a typical us/them categorization. The "they" category represents the people in power, and the "we" the people, who were excluded from the process. This interviewee thus delegitimizes the public consultation process because it did not reach citizens. Furthermore, most participants expected that political institutions would share information on the consultation process as well as on the impacts of the power lines, so they could "develop a critical and grounded opinion" (Elisa, focus group, Barcelinhos 1). Accordingly, lack of support and response from local authorities is likely to be one of the most significant deterrents to public participation (Lowndes, Pratchett & Stoker, 2001).

As in the interviews, participants in the focus groups repeatedly suggested that the consultation was marred since the very beginning by intentional concealment of the process itself. Information was absent or too late and/or inaccurate. "We got to know about it when everything had already been decided (...) in this parish they only started requesting signatures three days before [the process closed]" (Helena, focus group, Ribeira). These and others moral criticisms are explicitly related to the fundamental right to access the consultation process as participants did not have the sufficient information on the opportunities to express their voices (Senecah, 2004).

As conditions for citizens' early involvement were not created, people perceived the consultation process as biased (Rowe & Frewer, 2000). For most participants, information (mis)management was strategic and aimed at suppressing public contestation. There is therefore a problem of trust underpinning interpretations of public participation opportunities created by the State and which is likely to hold people back from engaging with such processes. A participant in a focus group in Refóios argued that people learned about the power lines project by accident: "and do notice that people learnt about the project by mere chance. There was a flaw somewhere. Someone from outside the system saw this process and rebelled" (Leonor). Regarding the consultation process, an interviewee from Gemieira maintained that "this was hidden from us all" (Fernando) and a participant in a focus group in Barcelinhos argued that "if they really were interested in hearing our opinion, they would have organized a clearer process" (Sofia, Barcelinhos 1).

Additionally, those few participants who had access to the consultation process emphasised that the nature of the language used in the official documents that describe the project was a hindrance to participation. "I have read a little bit, but there are parts that... It is a very technical language. It is not quite for us" (Rafaela, focus group, Tangil). Participants would like to have more information on the impacts of the EHVPL, with lack of information on health risks being particularly distressing for most of them:

> Interviewer – So you think that it was not well conducted?
> Sérgio – No. What worries us the most no-one says anything about.
> Lurdes – What worries people the most is the health issue
> and, in that respect, they say nil. (Focus group, Tangil)

Citizens felt that information was managed in a manner intended to limit knowledge of both the proposed project and of the possibility of voice, or, in other words, of having a say about what was being proposed. The minimum elements of access were not met (Senecah, 2004), which suggests a view of the institutions as not interested in citizens' views, opinions and concerns, even if they may claim the opposite (e.g., Arnstein, 1969; Rowe & Frewer, 2000). From an ethical perspective, there was no genuine opportunity to access the process nor disclosure of the information relevant to public

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understanding of consultations and evaluation of decisions[8]. The participants' views on the lack of access, information and knowledge suggest a perceived violation of several ethical principles, namely those related with the openness, accessibility and transparency of the process[9] as well as with the adequacy of the resources and tools provided to citizens' engagement.

Experiences of (simulative) consultation: format, interactions and citizens' standing

The format of this consultation has obvious problems in terms of access since it excludes people who cannot read or write, does not include any debate or deliberation, and depends heavily on a good information strategy (and respective media coverage) by the central/local government. During a public consultation, the Portuguese State (often through the Portuguese Environment Agency) is supposed to organize public sessions intended to help citizens understand projects and their impacts. To our knowledge there was only one that took place in Monção on 8 February 2014. The few participants in our samples that attended the public session expressed a strong frustration with the way it was organized, with the posture of speakers, the language used and time management:

> Rui – I didn't hang on until the end because it seemed endless, (...) each
> speaker came with their theory and it went on and on and when the actual
> debate started, when people started talking, I left, it was almost 8 in the
> evening and I had to leave.
> (...)
> Rui – It started at 3PM. It was about 7 and it had only been crap talk up
> until then.
> Simão – Yes, it was a lot of crap.
> Rui – There was this lady, this lady with the electrical company. [Simão –
> REN.] Yes, she just wouldn't finish.
> Simão – Sure, that's just to piss people off.
> Rui – Because a lot of people were villagers.
> Interviewer – Was the language quite technical?
> Rui – Sure, it was rather technical. There were a lot of villagers there,
> people that will be affected in their localities. They wanted to have a say
> and their turn just wouldn't arrive. Most people just left. [Interviewer –
> They left.] Travelling 15, 18 km, being there all afternoon and hardly getting
> [[understanding]] anything.
> (...)

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[8] Information retrieved from https://www.iap2.org/page/about

[9] See, for example, https://www.iap2.org/page/about

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Simão – Right. They come to speak to no one.

Interviewer – Because it was difficult to understand what they were saying, wasn't it?

Simão – Yes, of course. Talking to one one ((Everyone speaks at the same time agreeing with this idea)). They don't come with concrete data.

Rui – She spoke for almost an hour and a half.

Simão – For what? To put people off. To get them to leave.

Rui – This lady spoke, spoke and never (.) technical terms and that.

Simão – Obviously, it's all set up for that.

Rui – This man came after her and refuted nearly all that she said.

Simão – Of course.

Interviewer – Was he also an expert?

Simão – That was another hour and a half. (Group interview, Monção)

This account of the interaction between the speakers and the public clearly shows how the possibility of voice is constrained by institutional discourses that excessively empower expertise and close off to citizen participation through a technologization of issues and associated depoliticization (e.g., Carvalho et al., 2016). Whereas this project has severe potential impacts for the local population and can thus be viewed as a social and political matter, it was presented to that population as a highly technical matter that, together with excessive use of time, "gets them to leave" the room, fundamentally limiting their opportunities of participation. The extract presented above also illustrates the ways in which citizens deconstruct the strategic goals of powerful actors. It contains numerous hints of how citizens interpret the intentions of the state, of corporations and of the experts that speak in their name. Interestingly, these interviewees actively read the purposes of given ways of interacting with citizens: "putting them off".

The experienced modes of addressal of citizens are portrayed as disrespectful of the profile of the local population and of their circumstances. In Butler's terms (1997), there are references in this interview to a desire to be addressed by authorities but also of voice and recognition, and to how it is castrated. As Blüdhorn (2013) puts it, this exchange can be seen as a critique of the public session as a form of "simulative democracy", where some practices are used to create the illusion of political freedom and equality, and that "government is inspired by, and responsive to, the values and needs articulated by the demos" (Blüdhorn, 2013, p. 28).

Rather than contributing for public understanding of scientific, technological and environmental aspects associated to the projected power lines, this public session seemingly intensified mistrust and suspicion towards the State and large corporations. The pragmatic effect of this kind of session (where experts "speak to no one") is the development of forms of resistance to authorities through criticism and scepticism. In the conversation reproduced here, the interaction between the two interviewees reinforces

each other's views through lexical choice ("sure", "right", "obviously") and short turn allocation thus developing a shared culture of antagonism towards the state and other powerful actors. This rich excerpt offers interesting hints on the relational construction of identities, namely between citizens and experts. It also supports the argument that ethics should be guaranteed by those leading the consultation process (Fox & Murphy, 2012). The "experts" should then respect ethical principles in the design and implementation of the public consultation, not allowing any form of manipulation and placation of the public (Arnstein, 1969).

Power relations and citizen's desire of influence

The majority of participants were sceptical regarding the possibility of influencing political decisions. They viewed the political system – at times referred to as allied to the economic system – as unresponsive to citizen pressure. Many eschewed public participation as they considered it useless or meaningless vis-à-vis "the system". Whereas for some people this disbelief appeared to be based on previous experiences of public participation, for most it was not. Interestingly, expressed disbelief in the possibility of civic influence was several times contradicted by the cases recalled by interviewees when prompted to do so. Nevertheless, a few participants expressed positive views of the impact of civic action. Some had no recollection of cases of impactful or impactless public participation. These inconsistencies can be related to the post-democratic paradox described by Blühdorn (2013, p. 20) as the "peculiar simultaneity of incompatible commitments", which can be observed in late modernity consumer democracies where social pressures for more democratization (e.g., engagement of minority and under-privileged groups) coexist with a weakening of democracy in the context of a "liquid", individualistic and consumer society.

The views mentioned above appeared in association with allusions to power inequities. Several participants argued that certain actors in the political and economic realms – referred to as the "big ones" ("os grandes") or the "mighty ones" ("os maiorais") – hold (most of) the decision-making power whereas "people" are a weak element. The decision to build the power lines (or not) is essentially viewed as an unequal power relation where citizens are impotent. Perceived lack of influence via the public consultation is widespread and clearly expressed in Fernando's words: "fundamentally, I think it has all been decided already" (Gemieira). Discourses that explicitly suggest a lack of power from the part of the population to influence policies or institutions were quite consensual and uncontested:

> Helena – we're fighting against things that...
> Nuno – That are already decided.
> Helena – What little influence we will have.
> Nuno – We are so few.

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> Helena – Exactly. There have been some demonstrations and some effort
> has been made, for example, at the level of state budgets, going back to
> the political issue, which is, perhaps, the most visible aspect. We try hard
> and harder, and what comes out of it are the unions clapping and making
> deals. That is, the voice of the people no longer counts.
> Daniel – When it comes to the people, it's already been de-
> cided, there is no point ... (Focus group, Ribeira)

The positions reported above dismiss the public consultation process as decisions are interpreted as dependent on power distribution only. Thus, citizens' actions and positions are defined mainly as constrained by the actions and positions of others. Again, this illustrates the relational nature of the (discursive) construction of identities, which emerged very clearly from the data. The possibilities of participation offered by the State are seen as very negative for many subjects, who feel humiliated and ridiculed. The expressions used by participants suggest a relationship of domination in which the State is presented as the "lion" and the centre of power in relation to which citizens are construed as less knowledgeable or credible, and thus also concern matters of standing:

> Interviewer (addressing Rui) – Would that [expressed wish of seeing im-
> provements in the pension system] lead you to participate in some form of
> protest?
> Simão – If justified, why not?
> Rui – Yes, of course, if justified, if we could see that
> Simão – That there was a way out.
> Rui – That there was a way out for these things, yes.
> Simão – But not like this, no.
> Rui – We would be getting into the lion's mouth.
> Simão – Messing up with the top establishment (...) the centre of power,
> we cannot
> Rui – The system.
> Simão – If you could see, if you believed that it would have some impact,
> is that what you're saying?
> Rui – Precisely. Not like this, like this it's like flogging a dead horse.
> Simão – That's it. It's just to be humiliated, to be ridiculed. To be
> told: what's the point of a person at this age to get into that, huh?

The two speakers (from Monção) reinforce each other's positions by repeating what the previous speaker has said, completing each other's sentences, reinforcing the other's statement. In a focus group in Barcelinhos, a participant evoked a beast of prey to refer to the power that some people have. "Because then they reach a certain point and economically they cannot fight against these great sharks" (André). The images of "lions" and

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"sharks" are used to refer to those who have the power to decide. On the contrary, those who participate, and resist are defined as "clowns". The extract below may, at first, suggest a delegitimization of the "protestors" "for being half a dozen" and "saying nothing". A more in-depth analysis of the interview suggests that this discourse might be based on a strong disbelief regarding the power of the people to influence public policies:

> Gil – I think that individuals (…) Are too small to do… it's not worth fighting for something that is taken for granted (…) In principle there is (…) there must be acceptance of the municipalities, there must be acceptance of the parishes, right?
> Interviewer – There you go.
> Gil – The parishes have to make noise.
> Interviewer – The parishes are all the people (h).
> Gil –The parishes are, they are all the people, they are all (.) It's all of us. But they should have (…) we are at a very advanced stage of the project, they should, we are in a phase where the line has been drawn, the line is defined, isn't it? Before that, there should have been some consultation with the parishes, the municipalities. Has anyone said anything about it? Now come the clowns, the population, half a dozen people who do not even say anything. No! This should be passed on to the parish well in advance, not now at this stage.

In summary, in citizens' speech, their actions and positions are defined mainly as constrained by the actions and positions of others. Consequently, the type of power relations involved in the public consultation might have an impact on the way citizens engage with the public institutions and with the democratic system itself. Ultimately, these discourses suggested the need to rethink approaches to participation. As previously argued, efforts to promote participation need to be accompanied with proper support, otherwise "it may do serious harm" (Fox & Murphy, 2012, p. 212). These successive experiences of lack of access, standing and influence, leads to citizens feeling disempowered and disrespected, and may result in them actively avoiding engagement in further processes of public participation.

Envisioning ethics in public participation

In line with Senecah (2004), our analysis points to interdependence between practices of access and standing, as well as influence. Besides, expressed visions regarding an ideal and relevant public consultation process were strongly aligned with participants' narrated experiences of access, standing and influence. To address problems related to lack of access and standing, participants suggested a variety of strategies including: organizing informational and dialogue meetings, as well as public assemblies and joint

meetings with all the promoters of the project; directly reaching the population door-to-door; providing information through the power bill or by post; disseminating information via social networks; creating an information office at the parish hall and/or at the local church; distributing posters and flyers in local markets; using local media (newspapers, radio) to share information; and involving local organizations in the public consultation process. All participants seemed to agree that a combination of tools and channels of communication is the best way to ensure that all citizens – or at least most of them – are included in the consultation process:

> Rita – I think that we have to update ourselves a little bit. The times are for new technologies and disseminating via Facebook and other social media is crucial nowadays. And one shouldn't send different messages. Send a single message and adapt it to different types of audiences. New technologies are useful to reach a younger audience, but we must not forget that here in this type of parishes that are still so rural there is a part of the population that has no instruction, that is not so aware of these issues and needs to be informed by other means.
>
> Alexandre – There have to be several devices.
>
> Ana – For me it could be an email, but for the elder...
>
> Sofia – Or even more effectively, doing like the city council and leave a newsletter in people's mailboxes. (Focus group, Barcelinhos 1)

As highlighted by many participants, it is crucial that the conveyed message is clear and coherent across multiple channels. The church emerged as a key place for sharing information in the rural areas where the study was conducted, with many participants arguing for public announcements by the priest "if the priest announced it during mass (...) that's the first means to reach people" (Luísa, focus group, Refóios). The proposal of disseminating information on the EHVPL and the consultation through priests and churches reminds us of the need to consider the role of contextual factors in public participation. By placing public consultations in a local, social and political context, with specific characteristics that need to be addressed, the relevance and the ethics of the consultation will be more easily preserved.

Participants proposed the creation of several forums of participation, such as phone or web opinion polls, petitions and popular referenda. Many parallels with the current democratic voting system were made, with several participants expressing incomprehension regarding the lack of use of ballots in such an "important" matter, such as the EHVPL. People were very emotional about the lack of perceived right to express their voices in the matter, and asked for more debates, demonstrations, public sessions and forums of decision-making:

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> Luísa – I'm thinking about debates... Information dissemination by people who are competent, who have knowledge.
>
> Helena – Demonstrations.
>
> Daniel – Meetings.
>
> Rogério – A meeting held on a Sunday. Since they make you go vote on Sundays a meeting could also be scheduled on a Sunday.
>
> Interviewer – And people would go there and say what they think?
>
> Rogério – Yes.
>
> Helena – Through debates, demonstrations, if necessary, and through voting.
>
> Interviewer – All those things?
>
> Luísa – Considering that voting is by secret ballot ...
>
> Nuno – Maybe it will be easier for people to vote than to talk face to face.
>
> Helena – And the ballot being secret it is less likely to be influenced. (Focus group, Ribeira)

Although there was a lack of consensus regarding the ideal length of time for consultation processes (e.g., three or six months, one or two years), participants seemed to agree that the consultation process should take enough time to reach all the population, or at least most people, ensuring that all members in the community had the opportunity to participate in the process and clarify their doubts: "the time needed for people to be well informed" (Pedro, focus group, Tangil). Whilst participants' discourses highlighted minimum elements of access (e.g., opportunities to access information and education, and early involvement), they also asked for more opportunities for dialogue and debate, and for deliberation forums, which are connected to practices of standing (Senecah, 2004). The mentioned proposals also recognized the role of contextual variables and socio-demographics variables (such as level of religiosity of the community, social networks and instruction levels) in constraining public participation (Baker & Chapin, 2018).

It was clear that participants want to be heard, but more importantly they seem to desire that their proposals are binding, or at least taken into consideration: "How should the decision be made? People should have some binding power over the final decision, if not what's the point of debating if in the end ..." (Rodrigo, focus group, Barcelinhos 2). For most participants public participation is often misleading, creating false expectations of participants' power to influence the decision-making process. Nevertheless, several participants linked influence to expert knowledge. Expressions such as "feasible", "informed", "prudent", "knowledge-based" and "information-based" were used to illustrate the type of voice that should have legitimacy to influence the decision-making: "All opinions should be considered, discussed, and reach a realistic conclusion, and then the decision would be there if it was realistic" (Otávio, focus group, Tangil). These and other discourses suggested ambivalent positions regarding practices of influence. Ultimately,

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they reveal how "citizens" perceive their "own" legitimacy to decide and influence relevant issues.

Concluding reflections

Focusing on citizens' narrated experiences regarding practices of access, standing and influence, our analysis suggests that several ethical aspects need to be addressed to ensure a relevant consultation process. They relate to access to information and knowledge; consultation format, interactions with experts and citizens' standing; power relations and citizen influence. Elements of access, standing and influence appeared as interdependent (Senecah, 2004) and were linked through ethical aspects such as trust, respect, transparency, openness, and equitable power relations.

One of the first conclusions is that, in public consultations, one size does not fit all. Citizens made several suggestions to adjust formats, forums and times to the context and the project undergoing consultation. This aspect points to the need for attending to contextual factors and providing contextually-relevant forms in public participation processes. Contrariwise to a trend to determine universal criteria to public participation processes (e.g., Rowe & Frewer, 2000, 2004; Rowe et al., 2008), our analysis shows the importance of looking at contextual variables as well as to specific project-related dimensions that may deter people from participating (Baker & Chapin, 2018; Webler & Tuller, 2006). One of the ways to do so might be to provide plural and adequate means and forms of participation. This necessarily implies recognizing multiple possible ways of engaging the public, recognizing legitimacy to those forms of participation, and considering that the public may have different preferences about how public participation should be conducted. From an "ethics of care" perspective, it would imply to recognize particularity and plurality in the consultation process (Tronto, 2010).

It is particularly worrying that practices of access, standing and influence in the public consultation process were perceived as deceitful, dishonest and disrespectful to citizens. Participants suggested that more openness and transparency regarding the EHVPL project, as well as opportunities for public participation and influence, could help to address that and other problems. As others have suggested, purpose and trust (Baker & Chapin, 2018; Senecah, 2004)[10] are then key aspects when the goal is to improve public participation processes. In Arendt's terms, if there is no genuine opportunity to influence the outcome, as well as the process, public participation does not contain the possibility of political action, as "political action in an expression of human individuality and freedom, a beginning where something new is started which cannot be expected from whatever may have happened before" (Arendt, 1958, p. 178).

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[10] Information also retrieved from https://www.iap2.org/page/about

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Nevertheless, our analysis suggests that non-participation does not equal lack of interest and political disaffection (Cammaerts et al., 2014). Interestingly, people expressed a desire for more participation and presented several proposals on what an "ideal" process of public participation would be like. Given that the consultation that we studied was not considered a genuine opportunity to participate in decision-making, participants proposed strategies, means and forums for improving access, standing and influence. The suggestions made indicate that participants were quite hopeful about the promises of deliberative democracy (Fishkin, 2009). Discourses on practices of influence appeared intrinsically related to visions of a more democratic polis. Ultimately, by expressing the desire to participate and demanding ethical and relevant processes of participation, citizens were attributing legitimacy to participation.

The participants' proposals to rescue public consultations held several expectations in relation to democracy (Conrad et al., 2011) and suggested the need to politicize public participation processes, because the removal of the political character of decision-making may reduce the perceived capacity for collective agency (Hay, 2007; Wood, 2015), which in turn may have implications on how people see politics itself (van Wessel, 2010). The deterrents that were mentioned indicate that thinking about ethics and relevance in public participation should involve looking at public participation based on the democratic right to include everyone and under conditions that make them feel motivated (Fishkin, 2009). By claiming the right to express their concerns and to be involved in the public participation process, participants in this study claimed the power to achieve political "agency" and "gaining recognition" so that their voices are treated as legitimate. Our analysis suggests that if practices of access, standing and influence are based on trust, openness, transparency and notions of justice they may contribute to the revitalization of democracy. At the very least, they may help defuse some of the perceived power inequities that seem to constrain political agency and participation itself.

This research draws upon the views of a wide range of citizens living in various localities in the north of Portugal. Despite the qualitative rigour of our study and the combination of different data sources, this analysis focuses on discourses concerning a particular public consultation that occurred in a specific context. Furthermore, the combination of interviews and focus groups discussion also brought some challenges into the analysis. Although the analysis presented here attempts to give voice to both dominant and dissenting opinions, it is possible that dominant voices were over-represented and group dynamics under-analysed (Smithson, 2000). Future research should continue to explore the meanings associated with public participation, giving centrality to citizens' voices and perspectives of political processes (van Wessel, 2010). As suggested by this study, views on the ethics of public participation deserve special attention. ✎

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