

3c Surveys and public discussions

Short summary of characteristics

Surveys and public discussions are designed to obtain information from specific target groups including the public, experts, politicians, etc.. These can obtain information about the level of awareness and satisfaction, or about opinions and ideas on particular issues in policy and project development. Applying the tools requires:

- definition of goals, selection criteria for the target groups, methods to be applied;
- evaluation of resources needed including time, cost, experts required and training.

Surveys can include two types of questions; 'closed', which have several proposed answer options to choose from or 'open', such as where respondents have to answer without being given a hint. Surveys generally provide responses which are both qualitatively and quantitatively. Surveys are carried out in the form of:

- **Structured interviews** (face-to-face or by telephone): which promote standardisation of asking questions and recording answers. In face-to-face interviews the interviewer provides visual aid and support during the process of filling in the questionnaires. These interviews are considered useful in motivating the respondents to exercise a greater effort than in other types of survey responses. Telephone interviews are cheaper but reduce attention and motivation of the respondents.
- **Self completion questionnaire** (supervised, postal, email, web): Respondents answer questions by completing the questionnaire themselves with visual aid possible. There are certain drawbacks: (a) respondents may not possess the reading levels required; (b) it is not possible to employ follow-up questions tailored to the respondent's answers; (c) it is not possible to prevent respondents from browsing the entire questionnaire before filling it out or to control the order in which the survey questions are completed. Mail surveys are also particularly vulnerable to sampling bias.

Public discussions include Planning Forums, Planning for Real, Planning Workshop, etc. which are open, multipurpose events. The format is designed to obtain information, to discuss propositions for a development of a plan or a project, to generate ideas and create interaction between involved groups with a minimum of advance planning. Discussions can be organised by any of the actors involved in the project development. They combine interactive displays, an open forum, workshop groups and informal discussions. The use of simple models allow putting forward peoples' ideas on how their area could be improved ('planning for real'). This is a highly visible, hands-on community development and empowerment tool, which people of all abilities and backgrounds find easy and enjoyable to engage in.

Stage that the tool is used

Surveys and public discussions can be organised at any time but are particularly useful at an early stage in a decision making process. The communication strategy defines the use

of methods, focus groups, time and frequency in a case. The particular methods used are different depending on the objectives, level of participation (information, citizens' feedback, consultations, joint planning, and citizen control), and characteristics of target groups. The key factor that distinguishes consultation from participation is the degree to which those involved are allowed to influence, share or control decision making.

Output from the tool

Output from surveys includes tables, graphics and analysis of responses concerning general trends in public awareness, interests and needs. Public discussions can produce reports with critical analysis, recommendations, new ideas, etc..

Experiences of use

Surveys and public discussions are useful tools for gathering information, opinions or ideas from a wide range of target groups and give a feedback on the specific issue for which they are designed. It is important to know what the purpose is, who could answer the posed question and what the relevant method is. Both methods are elements of communication strategies that should be developed by interdisciplinary teams including social experts.