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What is the relationship between participation and conflict in the implementation of development projects? Lessons from Ault

The proposal focuses on the interactions between institutional participation mechanisms and 'uninvited' participation (Wynne, 2007; Wagenaar, 2014 in Bobbio and Melé, 2015) in the implementation of a relocation and urban redevelopment project to address coastal erosion in Ault (Baie de Somme, France). This project was launched in 2013 and its implementation quickly became very conflictual. We analyse the initial implementation of participatory mechanisms in the design of the project, the emergence of conflicts challenging these mechanisms, and the project's ability to manage these conflicts over time. The main actors involved are the municipality and inter-municipal actor responsible for development, a local NGO and local state services. The proposal does not reduce the results of the project to the presence or absence of participation mechanisms. It focuses, along time, on the evolution of the relationship between participation mechanisms and the conflict at stake.

As already stated in other research, we describe how the conflict has progressively evolved all along the negotiation process. From frontal opposition and unresolvable conflict (which can be described as an "either -or" conflict (Hirschman, 1994), a common construction has gradually emerged.

The fieldwork is qualitative, based on 32 semi-structured interviews and site visits between 2022 and 2023 ; analysis of institutional documents and the press. The presentation follows the different phases of the project. Firstly, we show a period of strong conflict between local stakeholders. In this phase, practitioners and policy makers encounter difficulties in setting up participatory mechanisms to discuss the project after it had been publicly announced. The fieldwork shows how difficult it is for policy makers to engage in dialogue with a mobilisation that is gaining strength and multiplying its modes of action. Secondly, we show the period of local reconfiguration, with changes in the position of the local elected representatives; finally we shed light on the current collaborative actions between previously opposed actors. While these actions do not mean that all disagreements have disappeared, they do illustrate the real cooperation that is taking place between actors. Eventually, inspired from previous research and papers (Bobbio and Melé, 2015; Blondiaux, 2008), we show how conflicts have contributed to the design of participation processes locally as they encouraged policy makers to adapt and transform the participation processes initially defined. On a longer term, they contributed to the definition of the future for the coastline.

References

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