Two tools for choosing the appropriate depth of public participation in decision-making [1]

Deciding an appropriate level of public participation depends on the context and appears to be as much an art as a science. Advice from experienced practitioners should always be sought when designing a community involvement process. However as a guide, the following tools may be useful.

1) The Public Participation Matrix [2]

The choice of a community involvement process depends on your assessment of two factors:

- the *risk* inherent in the situation e.g. the potential for negative environmental or social impact, or the risk of community conflict.

- the *complexity* of information which needs to be digested before informed participation is possible.
  Here are some questions to help you evaluate these factors.

Inherent risk

1) How do you rate the potential for conflict with the community over this decision?

☐ Low   ☐ Medium   ☐ High

2) How do you rate the potential for social, environmental, or financial damage if the wrong decision is made?

☐ Low   ☐ Medium   ☐ High

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[1] These tools were developed in the course of a joint project of Les Robinson and Nolan-ITU for the Western Australian Local Government Association: *A Pro-Active Public Participation Policy for Waste Recovery in Western Australia*, 2002.

[2] The assessment questionnaire is inspired by a similar tool used by the International Association for Public Participation.

3) How many unknowns are there in the current decision-making equation?

	None		A few		Many

Complexity of information

4) How much information needs to be communicated to the community for them to participate?

	A few simple facts		A detailed proposal		A significant amount of technical data

5) How much learning is required by the participants before they can be expected to make an informed decision?

	Low		Medium		High

6) How many abstract or technical concepts need to digested before an informed decision can be made?
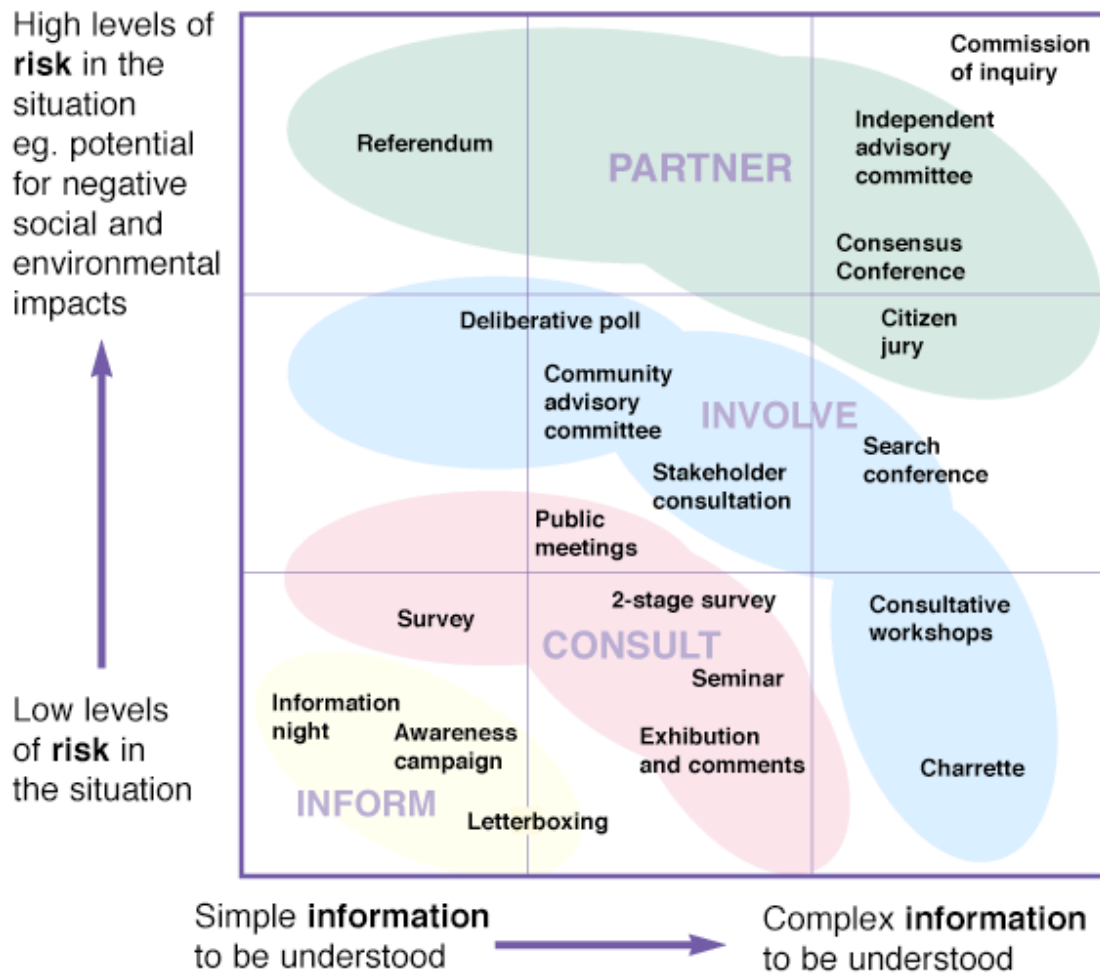
	None		A few		Many

Interpretation

IF most of your answers are in the left hand boxes, then CONSULT methods may be sufficient.

IF your answers are scattered between the left, centre and right hand boxes, then INVOLVE methods may be sufficient.

IF the most of your answers are in the right-hand boxes, then you should consider using PARTNER techniques to minimise your risk and maximise the amount of knowledge and perspectives brought into the decision-making process.

The matrix below is a guide to particular community involvement methods which may be suited to the risk and complexity of your situation.

High levels of **risk** in the situation eg. potential for negative social and environmental impacts

Low levels of **risk** in the situation

Referendum

PARTNER

Commission of inquiry

Independent advisory committee

Consensus Conference

Deliberative poll

Community advisory committee

INVOLVE

Citizen jury

Stakeholder consultation

Search conference

Public meetings

Survey

2-stage survey

CONSULT

Consultative workshops

Seminar

Information night Awareness campaign

Exhibition and comments

Charrette

INFORM Letterboxing

Simple **information** to be understood

Complex **information** to be understood

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Figure 1: The Public Participation Matrix © Les Robinson 2003

2) Vroom-Yetton Decision Tree [3]

In 1973 Victor Vroom and Phillip Yetton introduced a contingency decision-making model for the business world. The model was intended to aid in deciding on the level of participation by subordinates would improve the quality of decision making in a corporate setting. The utility of the model was verified in a number of empirical studies.

The model was subsequently modified slightly to allow for public participation in general and in natural resource decision-making in specific, and has been tested in a number of independent studies (Lawrence and Deagen 2001).

We have altered the model slightly to improve clarity and suit the Australian context.

KEY

A: The manager solves the problem or makes the decision alone without public involvement (=INFORM).

B: The manager seeks information from segments of the public, but decides alone in a manner which may or may not reflect public influence. (=CONSULT)

C: The manager shares the problem with separate segments of the public or stakeholders, getting ideas and suggestions, then makes a decision which reflects public influence. (=INVOLVE, with separated stakeholder segments)

D: The manager shares the problem with the public and stakeholders as an assembled group, getting ideas and suggestions, then makes a decision which reflects public influence. (=INVOLVE, with mixed participants)

E: The manager shares the problem with the public an stakeholders as an assembled group, and together the manager and the group attempt to reach agreement on a solution. (=PARTNER)

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[3] Adapted slightly from Lawrence, R.L, and D.A Deagen. 2001, Choosing Public Participation Methods for Natural Resources: A Context-Specific Guide. *Society and Natural Resources*, 14:857–872.

1) Does the manager have sufficient information to make a high quality decision?

2) Is the problem structured such that there is space for alternative solutions?

3) Is public acceptance of the decision critical to effective implementation?

4) If public acceptance is necessary, is it reasonably assured if the manager decides alone?

5) Are the public and stakeholders willing to engage in a dialogue in order to improve the situation?

6) Would the quality of public input (or future relations) be improved if learning occurs among the public and stakeholders about the issues?
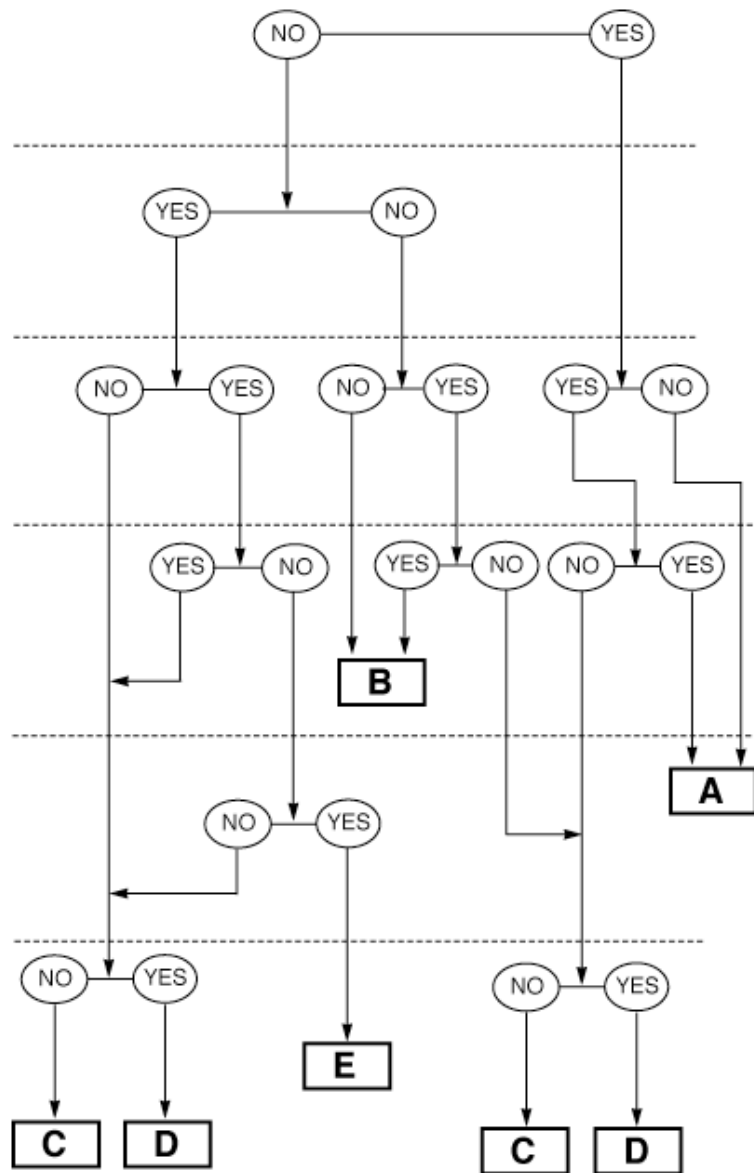
Figure 2: Vroom-Yetton decision tree for selecting public participation methods for government decision making.