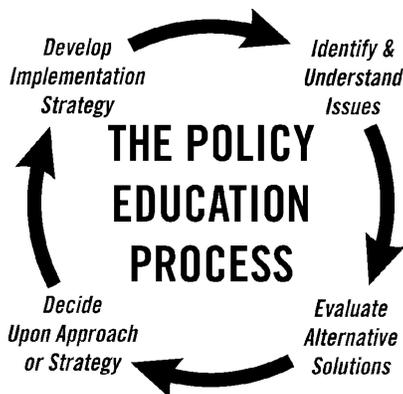


Extension's Role in Public Issues Education and Dispute Resolution

NC STATE UNIVERSITY

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The mission of the North Carolina Cooperative Extension Service (CES) is to enable people to improve their lives and communities through partnerships and knowledge put to work. From its beginning, CES has provided educational programs about public issues. Initially, they revolved around agricultural policy and involved campus-based faculty who wrote teaching materials and traveled to meetings to teach people in an objective and neutral way. While public issues educators still strive to be neutral and objective, they have widened their scope considerably. Public issues educators now teach about natural resource and environmental issues, as well as welfare reform, the transition from school to work, food safety, and childcare. CES educators have made major contributions over the past 50 years in helping citizens, groups, and public officials to make policy.



Public Issues

A public issue is a topic of concern to a broad community. Controversy often arises from the differing views, values, and interests that people hold about the issue. Public issues prompt public choices—to change policy or preserve the status quo. This publication includes examples of North Carolina conflicts over water quality, farmland protection, hog farms, and other difficult issues.

What is Public Issues Education (PIE)?

Public issues education is an Extension educational activity that emphasizes knowledge-based decision-making and is applied to issues of broad concern. The principal objective is to help citizens educate themselves so that they can make better-informed policy choices. Public Issues Education programs incorporate a variety of techniques, including those used in public policy education and public dispute resolution. They are designed for issues of conflict. When PIE is incorporated into policy making, communities can use the conflict as an opportunity to explore topics, better understand the issues, and consider alternate solutions.

PIE recognizes the legitimate role of education in enabling individuals and groups to make better-informed decisions. PIE also recognizes that convening people with various interests and perspectives may allow them to achieve a mutual understanding of an issue and perhaps even develop alternative solutions to the problem. The purpose is to help people move from their *positions* (what they say they want) to their *interests* (their underlying reason for concern) so they may communicate clearly.

Policy Education

Policy education is cyclic. The cycle begins with an issue that is perceived as a problem

in the community. In an effective policy-making process, people become involved, consider alternative solutions and their consequences, choose a policy, and carry it out. The final step is to evaluate the policy, which may begin the cycle over again. PIE processes may be used during some or all steps of the cycle.

How Does One Recognize an Issue That Is Ripe for PIE?

When public issues emerge, there is usually increasing public concern about the issue along with long-term media coverage. Sometimes they result from a crisis that attracts attention. People who are committed to the issue begin to publicly address it.¹ Others may hold multiple perceptions, values, and beliefs, which need to be understood and considered in making decisions. Due to these various perspectives, conflict is often involved in making a policy to address the issue. Including various stakeholders in decision making may help since incorporating their views may clarify the problem, as well as gain support, perhaps, for the final decision.

Helping Communities to Reach Agreements

PIE provides a forum for people involved in public-issue disputes to reach mutually acceptable solutions by communicating meaningfully and effectively. The Public Issues Education process allows communities to focus more effectively on the resolution of public issues by incorporating the following techniques:

1. **Citizen-participation activities** are designed to bring citizens together with representatives of public and private organizations to make public choices. To succeed, the process design

¹ Dale, Duane. September 1993. *Public Issues Education: A Handbook*. University of Wisconsin Cooperative Extension.

must be understood and agreed upon by all parties.

- 2. Interest-based negotiation** emphasizes the awareness of one's own/other parties' *interests*, or why they support a position, rather than *position*, the ideal that they want. This allows the invention of new alternatives that satisfy mutual interests. These may be non-policy alternatives.
- 3. Consensus building** attempts to make decisions that all members of the group can support. This method encourages group members to educate one another, as well as helps groups to learn together, to generate multiple options, and to select one that satisfies mutual interests.

Roles of the Extension Professional

The PIE process is not a one-size-fits-all approach to resolving public policy conflicts. Rather, a program must be tailor-made to fit the individual circumstance. The level of involvement by Extension professionals may vary.

Extension professionals may play many key roles in public issues education. These roles involve *content* (information provider and technical adviser) and *process* (convener, facilitator, program developer, mediator).

In *content* roles, Extension professionals provide information and help interpret it.

- ◆ As *information providers*, they share research-based facts.
- ◆ As *technical advisors*, they help stakeholders sift through the facts and interpret what the facts mean in different contexts.

In *process* roles, Extension professionals help interested parties to interact productively.

- ◆ As *conveners*, they seek to draw the various stakeholders into a collaborative problem-solving venture.
- ◆ As *facilitators*, they may also help choose the meeting format, set the ground rules, focus attention on the decision-making process, and use con-

sensus-seeking techniques. As either conveners or facilitators, they may work within a coalition of interested parties, establishing goals and procedures through shared decision making.

- ◆ As *program developers*, they help develop a long-range educational program and a set of short-range actions to implement the program.
- ◆ As *mediators*, they work with the disputing parties individually or collectively to improve their collaborative problem-solving skills. They also might assume a middle position by intervening, interposing, and reconciling differences, trying to bring about consensus and settlement.

In communities, PIE principles and practices are useful in:

- ◆ Increasing Awareness
- ◆ Building Coalitions
- ◆ Networking
- ◆ Problem-solving

Extension professionals have a special challenge in providing useful and unbiased information without taking sides. They must deal with *facts*, which are verifiable statements; *myths*, which are what people perceive to be true; and *values*, which are standards of personal preference. Because the resolution of public issues involves value judgments, conflicts are to be expected. In this context, Extension professionals must focus on replacing myths with facts and on creating respect for different values. They also help people to clarify and understand the implications of their values.

Recognizing Success of Public Issues Education

Success of a PIE program can be measured in many ways. Some possible outcomes of successful Public Issues Education include:²

- ◆ Better understanding of issues
- ◆ Collaborative efforts to address issues
- ◆ Expanded options
- ◆ A more thorough analysis of impacts
- ◆ Public choices that are more effective, sustainable, and fair
- ◆ Long-run benefits that include greater

competence among leaders and public representatives, more networks of collaborators, and enhanced community and organizational ability to address issues.

Administrative Support

Public issues education fits the mission of the Cooperative Extension Service. Because of the potential for controversy, it is essential for administration to explicitly support public issues education. In turn, Extension professionals must plan and execute Public Issues Education programs that are balanced, that are based upon scientifically derived information, and that facilitate collaborative problem solving. The following policy statement from the North Carolina Cooperative Extension Service is an example of an administrative support document:

“The North Carolina Cooperative Extension Service believes that public issues education is consistent with its mission and supports this activity for its professionals. The administration also recognizes that public issues education may place Extension professionals in controversial positions. No public issues education program is totally risk-free to the Extension professional, but the support or involvement of advisory groups and supervisors will minimize the risk. The Extension administration will fully support well-planned and executed public issues education programs that are balanced, are based upon scientifically derived information, and facilitate collaborative problem solving.

The administration's commitment to public issues education may be seen in its support for appropriate in-service training and study leave opportunities for Extension professionals; in the development of educational materials; in the development and fostering of linkages and information-sharing with other agencies and groups; in the acquisition and allocation of additional resources where possible; and in the recognition and rewarding of those individuals who conduct public issues education programs.”³

² Ibid.

³ From the Policy of the North Carolina Cooperative Extension Service on Public Issues Education.

Successful NCCES Public Issues Education Programs

Case Study #1 Chowan River Basinwide Management Plan, Marjorie Rayburn

The Project

Marjorie Rayburn, an Extension professional in Chowan County, North Carolina, sought public input for a state water quality management plan for the Chowan River Basin. Although one workshop was held in July 1996 to gather public comment, many people did not attend and Marjorie thought the basinwide planning process still needed their valuable feedback. Together with the N.C. Division of Water Quality (DWQ) and the Chowan River Basin Regional Coordinating Council, she held multiple meetings with groups and individuals to determine their concerns about the basin.

Extension's Role

Marjorie served as a facilitator throughout the process. She collected, prioritized, and provided stakeholders' concerns and issues to DWQ for inclusion in the Chowan River Basinwide Water Quality Management Plan. She also reviewed the draft plan and suggested changes based on the feedback gathered through the PIE process.

Lessons Learned

If few citizens seem to care about an important public issue, target and gather feedback from those citizens who *do* express an interest. Then educate others on how the issue affects their community.

Since no crisis was occurring in the Chowan River Basin at the time, many people did not seem to care about the management plan. Also, water quality in the Chowan River had actually improved since the occurrence of algal blooms in the 1970s. To generate more participation, Marjorie approached people who did care and then educated others on the importance of the issue. She found that once people knew more about the issues surrounding the management of the river, they sometimes did have opinions about it.

Outcome

- ◆ The PIE process used in the Chowan River Basin led to a better understanding of the issues surrounding management of the river.
- ◆ Pertinent local information was included in the Chowan River Basinwide Plan. This information provides a solid basis for decision-making in the basin that incorporates stakeholder concerns.

Case Study #2 Farmland Protection in Durham County, Craven Hudson

The Project

In 1994, a small group of Durham County leaders led by a local farmer and a developer approached the county manager to discuss farmland protection. The county created an advisory board to explore alternatives for farmland protection and to craft a working program. Cooperative Extension and other agricultural agencies were included as non-voting board members, with Extension eventually taking responsibility as staff for the board.

The goal was to protect farmland so farmers could continue farming. The idea also was to promote aesthetics and open space. After the board investigated various farmland protection options, it decided to establish a Voluntary Agricultural District (VAD) program, which was supported by the county commissioners. The board recruited VAD members and simultaneously developed measures for compensating farmers who preserve their farmland. After three years of effort, the board had established 16 Voluntary Agricultural Districts. The board proposed an ordinance for farmland protection to county commissioners that included mechanisms for donating easements, leasing easements, or purchasing easements. County commissioners passed the ordinance on July 29, 1999, minus the leasing provision. Farmers continue to join the Voluntary Agricultural Districts.



Extension's Role

Craven was the board's convener and facilitator in 1994 and also provided information to the board and the public. His involvement provided the momentum the board needed to keep moving through the lengthy process.

Lessons Learned

- ◆ **Be prepared to be misunderstood when you think you have done everything possible to provide clear information.**
The biggest obstacle Craven found was in helping farmers on the board to understand that they were establishing voluntary measures. During many discussions, they presumed that the county would take away private property rights, when in reality the board was trying to find methods that were favorable to farmers. Eventually, the board was able to convince farmers that the Voluntary Agricultural Districts were indeed voluntary, and once a few board members became VAD members, others followed.
- ◆ **Asking citizens to challenge long-held beliefs and mistrust in public processes requires perseverance.**
Some farmers were suspicious of including Craven on the board, thinking that he would be closely aligned with the county government. However, Craven persevered until the farmers saw that he was working with both them and the government to develop the best plan possible.
- ◆ **Understand that strong emotions cause people to say things that they don't necessarily mean to say. Let those things roll off you.**
- ◆ **Check out your own personal biases. You should only work on an issue if you can suspend any biases about it.**

Outcome

- ◆ The advisory board had established 21 Voluntary Agricultural Districts in Durham County as of October 1999.
- ◆ Trust was built between farmers and local government.

Case Study #3 Land Use Planning in Moore County, Charles E. Hammond

The Project

Leaders in Moore County, the Chamber of Commerce, and municipalities encouraged the Moore County commissioners to develop and implement a countywide land use-plan. The commissioners restructured the county planning department and appointed a 21-member steering committee made up of diverse stakeholders to develop a plan. At the request of the county manager and commissioners, Charles Hammond, Moore County Extension director, worked with the planning director and planning board to plan the committee, public educational programs, and public involvement.

Between March and July 1998, the steering committee conducted nine educational meetings to give an overview of community-based land-use planning. The committee then conducted 14 community meetings to gather public input on land-use planning in Moore County. At each meeting, participants were divided into small groups and asked to answer these questions:

1. What questions or concerns do you have about zoning or land-use planning?
2. What are your priorities for the use of land in Moore County over the next several years?

The committee's objectives were to educate citizens on land-use planning and to involve them in the process. Rather than engaging citizens in a fight against land-use planning, the committee *involved them extensively* in the development of the plan. The land-use educational program continues today.

Extension's Role

Extension's primary role was to convene people and to facilitate discussion at public meetings and steering committee meetings. Extension also coordinated the educational process.

Lessons Learned

- ◆ **Don't try to answer technical questions outside your area of expertise—direct citizens to the appropriate source.**
The steering committee found a lack of understanding of land-use regulation and its relationship to agriculture. Extension worked closely with the planning department to ensure that correct information was distributed.
- ◆ **Extension expertise can augment other agency/community efforts. Extension is generally seen in a positive light.**
Extension served to "troubleshoot" throughout the land-use planning process and helped to build relationships between the agricultural community and the planning department.
- ◆ **Understand that potentially explosive public issues require constant monitoring and flexibility in your approach.**



Outcome

- ◆ Citizens have greater trust in local government and more confidence that they will be included in discussions about land-use proposals.
- ◆ The committee gathered and prioritized more than 1,000 citizen concerns for consideration in land-use planning.
- ◆ The committee agreed to a countywide land-use plan, which it recommended for adoption to the planning board and county commissioners.

Case study #4 Watershed Education for Communities and Local Officials, Leon Danielson

The Project

In August 1996, a team of N.C. Cooperative Extension staff members from NC State University and the Extension directors from Onslow, Jones, and Carteret counties responded to citizen concerns about the water quality in the White Oak River watershed. The team convened a tri-county citizens advisory board to identify water quality issues in the watershed, investigate these issues, and develop solutions.

During its first year, the White Oak River Watershed Advisory Board studied the impact of the N.C. Department of Transportation (DOT)'s proposed widening of the N.C. 24 causeway. The board used information presented by an expert panel and other information and maps provided by Extension staff and developed recommendations for DOT regarding its concerns. The solutions developed by the board and DOT will reduce the impact of highway stormwater runoff on the water quality of the river. The board also recommended that the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers study the White Oak River to learn more about how the causeway affects the river's hydrology and ecology. The study was included in the 1999 Congressional Water Resources Development Act.

The board then moved on to investigate its next priority, the increasing closures of shellfish areas in the river. After more than a year of study, in fall 1999 the board began discussing options for addressing closures.

Extension's Role

Local Extension Directors Minton Small, Danny Shaw, and Ray Harris worked with NC State University Extension staff, who were headed by Leon Danielson and Nancy White, to convene the advisory board and facilitate their meetings. NC State University staff assembled the expert panel and provided scientific information to the board.

Lessons Learned

- ◆ **When calling a stakeholder committee to action, start with a "small bite" so that the committee can experience success early in the process.** *The White Oak River Watershed Advisory Board chose to investigate the expansion of the N.C. 24 causeway out of urgency because construction was about to start. It was a specific and localized issue, so the board was able to resolve it rather quickly, within a year. With this early success, the board was motivated to move on to a broader and trickier issue—increasing shellfish area closures in the river.*
- ◆ **Involve key decision-makers in your effort by keeping them informed.** *Cooperative Extension staff involved DOT early in the board's investigation of the process. When the board presented its recommendation that DOT change its highway expansion plans, DOT representatives were not surprised. DOT willingly made some changes in its plans in response to the board's recommendations.*

Outcome

- ◆ Citizens were educated about water quality in their watershed.
- ◆ The board's collaborative solutions reduced harm from highway stormwater runoff on water quality in the White Oak River.
- ◆ As a result of the board's recommendation and lobbying, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers may study the causeway's effects on the White Oak River's hydrology and ecology.

Case study #5 Intensive Livestock Operations Study Committees, Steve Smutko

The Project

Craven and Beaufort counties have experienced unprecedented growth in hog production. The number of hogs doubled from approximately 52,000 in each county in 1990 to 104,000 in Beaufort County and 103,000 in Craven County in 1998. Although there was some organized local opposition to this growth, the issue gained wide attention when a group of investors announced plans to construct a large sow operation in northwest Craven County on the border with Beaufort County. After hearing strongly voiced concerns from both rural and urban residents, Craven County commissioners declared a moratorium on new intensive livestock operations and on expansions of existing operations in February 1997. Beaufort County commissioners did the same in May 1997. Citing numerous public and environmental health concerns, both county boards recognized the need for a public discussion on the growth of the livestock industry in the county.



Both boards called for the formation of an Intensive Livestock Operations (ILO) Moratorium Study Committee in each county to research the problems associated with intensive livestock operations and to recommend solutions to those problems. Committee members were appointed by the respective county managers and represented the interests with a stake in the outcome of the policy decisions. Each committee had representatives from agriculture, local environmental organizations, public health agencies, and the public at large. The objective of each study committee was to forward a consensus recommendation to its respective board of commissioners on how the commissioners should regulate intensive livestock operations in comparison to the state's regulations. Recognizing the level of disagreement within the community over where swine operations would be located, how they would be managed, as well as the diversity of opinion held by those at the negotiating table, both study committees enlisted the resources of the Cooperative Extension Service in resolving these differences.

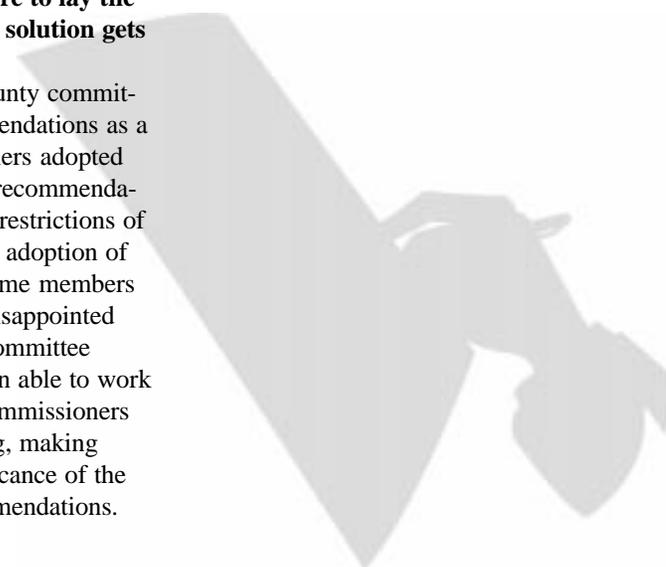
Extension's Role

Steve Smutko, an Extension specialist at NC State University, convened the committees and facilitated the meetings. Extension also played an important role in bringing scientific information to the committees and preparing reports for the members.

Lessons Learned

- ◆ **Be prepared to work with your group to reach an agreement on types and sources of information that will be used to evaluate the problem and options for resolution.** When issues are highly technical, stakeholders may disagree about the data they will use to analyze the issue. In fact, information provided by the land-grant university may be suspect to some participants. Take the time to help your group agree on the types and sources of information they will use for making decisions.
- ◆ **Preparation is a key to success in public issues education, particularly when the issue is controversial and people are in conflict.** Talk to key stakeholders before bringing them together to learn about the issues, and identify the people and organizations that need to be involved in finding solutions. By talking to each participant first, you can learn where people are most likely able to reach mutually acceptable solutions. Work with the stakeholders to draft a "group charter" that will guide the group through its deliberations.
- ◆ **Once a group has arrived at a solution to a problem, be sure to lay the groundwork so that the solution gets carried out.** Although the Craven County committee presented its recommendations as a package, the commissioners adopted some, but not all, of the recommendations and included some restrictions of their own. Expecting full adoption of the recommendations, some members of the committee were disappointed with the outcome. The committee members might have been able to work more closely with the commissioners as the process went along, making them aware of the significance of the entire package of recommendations.

Outcome

- ◆ Extension successfully convened diverse stakeholders, who reached a consensus on fashioning county policy.
 - ◆ Extension played a significant educational role by bringing a variety of scientists, experts, and others to the committees. This way, committee members could draw their own conclusions about the impacts of intensive livestock operations and about the consequences of potential policy options.
 - ◆ Craven County commissioners passed an ordinance based on the committee's recommendations.
 - ◆ Beaufort County commissioners accepted the recommendations of their committee, but they have not passed an ordinance.
 - ◆ Consensus could not be reached on all issues.
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Case Study #6

Oconaluftee River Greenway Project, Robert Hawk

The Project

A lack of riparian zone protection along waterways in the Lower Little Tennessee River subbasin watershed, combined with a request for walking trails by the Cherokee Indian Reservation, prompted Rob to convene a Regional Greenways Steering Committee. Composed of stakeholders from Graham, Jackson, and Swain counties and the Cherokee Reservation, the committee has been meeting since November 1998 and convened a Healthy and Happy Trails Workshop/Conference in May 1999.

The purpose of the workshop was to educate the public and to share local and regional perspectives about the social, economic, and environmental issues surrounding greenways. Participants in the workshop identified pilot projects and crafted a preliminary plan for developing a regional greenway system.

Extension's Role

Rob served as the program developer. Partners in the effort include Western North Carolina Tomorrow, the National Park Service, Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians, The Conservation Fund, U.S. Department of Agriculture-Natural Resources Conservation Service, local business owners, and county administrators from Swain and Graham counties.

Lessons Learned

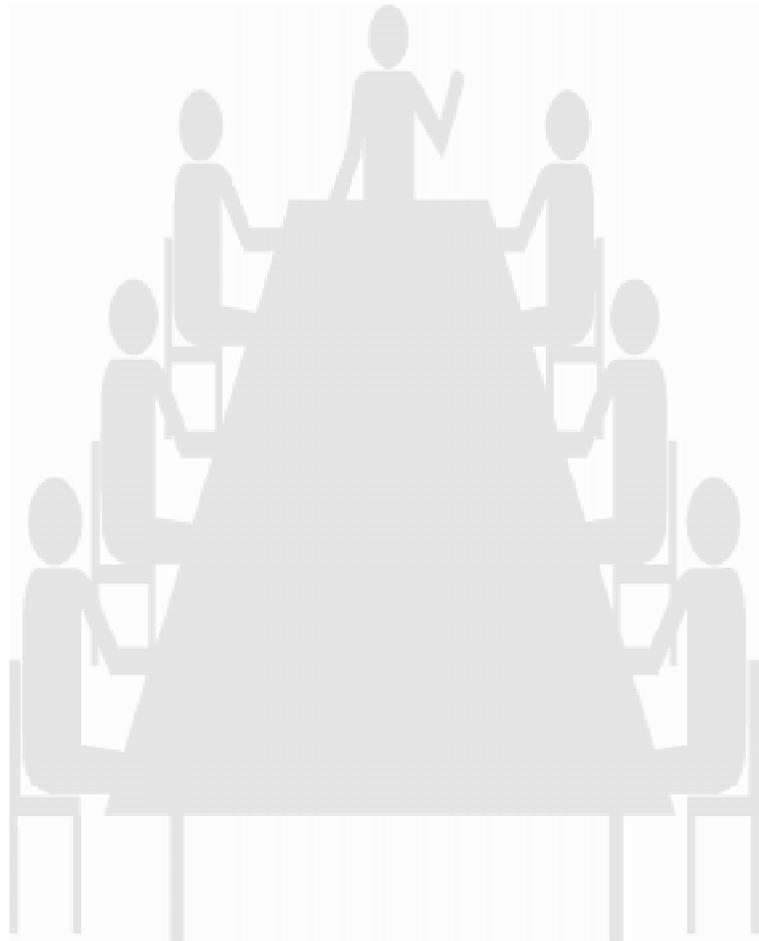
Assess the stakeholders and issues before beginning a project.

Identifying the stakeholders is key to the success of a Public Issues Education project, which involves consensus building. Individuals or organizations with a stake in the outcome may attempt to destroy the process or outcome if they feel they are not involved in the decision-making process.⁴ Be patient, and thoroughly investigate your community's issues and needs before proceeding.

Outcome

- ◆ Workshop participants identified pilot projects and crafted a plan for communities in the region to proceed with the greenways project.
- ◆ The Regional Greenways Steering Committee was formed out of increased interest from community leaders and continues to plan the greenway system.
- ◆ Approximately 100 citizens learned about greenways and their benefits.

⁴ Smutko, Steve; Garber, Simon. July 1998. *Public Dispute Resolution and Participatory Decision Making: Training Notes*. Natural Resources Leadership Institute, NCCES, North Carolina State University.





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