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Europe Wide Views on Sustainable Consumption

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Abstract: *Jørgensen, Kozarev and Lindegaard Juul lay out the rationale and methodology for a multi-site citizen participation exercise carried out within the larger framework of the PACITA project. The exercise gathered more than 1,000 citizens at parallel citizens' summits in eleven European countries, exemplifying the practicability of orchestrating public engagement in connected national arenas across Europe. The authors argue that not only did the events themselves provide comparable samples of informed and deliberated opinions, but also the cross-national collaboration to prepare the events, which involved both central stakeholders and policymakers, served as a vehicle for consensus building among these actors. Based on the response of participants and political recipients, a call is made for further capacity building for cross-European citizen participation.*

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The infamous democratic deficit of European institutions has spurred a range of different initiatives that aim to close down the persisting gap between decision makers and citizens. Once a buzzword, public engagement has become a staple of European policy discourse on account of this remaining deficit. By way of realizing the potential of public engagement, procedures have been developed with and in some cases embedded in institutional procedures. But recent cases show that great dissatisfaction among citizens remains with regard to their ability to influence policy.

One promising avenue of development is that of deliberative forms of citizens' engagement at relatively early stages of European policy formation. Such formats have been tested on several occasions by European research projects (CIVISTI, VOICES and others; see also Olsen and Trenz, 2010) and show great promise. These projects have shown the ability of deliberative processes to qualify citizens' opinions based on information and mutual learning as well as to establish through dialogue a democratic rather than merely private mind-set among citizens. This means that while such 'mini-publics' are rarely representative in a statistical sense, they manage nevertheless to give a trustworthy picture of the differences of opinion that may emerge through public debates on policy matters. Furthermore, these experiments have thoroughly debunked the myth that citizens will not be able to grasp the complexity of policy matters. The opposite in fact seems true: citizens quickly home in on the most crucial issues once the knowledge base that is available to decision makers is presented to them.

One reservation remains, however, that prevents Europe from wholeheartedly embracing deliberative public engagement, namely the concern whether citizens are in fact able to adopt a 'European perspective' without the intervention of overly costly procedures of lingual and cultural translation. To address this reservation, the third example project of PACITA adapted a multi-site citizens' participation method developed in the TA community. We wanted to show that the dichotomy between one European policy and several national polities is a false one: national publics are already 'de facto' cosmopolitan publics (Beck and Grande, 2007), and with regard to issues of systemic risks shared across border, coordinating public engagement across European member states in fact produces a genuinely European *vox populi*.

On 25 October 2014, more than 1,000 ordinary citizens participated in this cross-national citizen consultation entitled Europe Wide Views on Sustainable Consumption.¹ The day-long event took place simultaneously

in eleven EU member states (see below). The substantial aim of the consultation was to bring the reflected views of citizens to policy makers and thus influence concrete policies in the years ahead. Sustainable consumption is one of the grand challenges faced by European society, and one in which the range of policy options is closely linked to public opinion. And policy makers generally hesitate to consider policies aimed at private consumption for fear of intervening too much in the private sphere. With this consultation, we wanted to restructure the debate on policies on sustainable consumption by allowing citizens to redraw from their own perspectives the line between acceptable and intrusive interventions in private consumption patterns. As we shall see below, this public engagement exercise became a process through which not only citizens, but also supporting stakeholders and policy makers came to revisit basic policy assumptions – precisely from a European perspective.

Background

The European citizens' consultation on sustainable consumption was based on a previous method design developed by a core of TA partners, namely the World Wide Views method. This method was originally designed to provide a platform for citizen participation in the UN COP negotiations on climate and biodiversity (Rask, Worthington and Lammi, 2012), but with a few modifications, it proved to be fully adaptable to the European context, producing the 'Europe Wide Views' (EWViews) approach. The method combines simultaneous national face-to-face citizen consultations with a web-based transnational comparison of national results.² At each national site, roughly 100 citizens deliberated in small groups on the basis of the same information material and voted anonymously on the same questions which made it possible to make transnational comparisons.

The issue of European policy development for sustainable consumption presents four characteristics, which makes the EWViews method particularly appropriate. First, patterns of production and consumption are intrinsically part of every citizen's daily life, and policies to affect these patterns therefore affect citizens directly. This is the basic criterion for situations in which citizens' participation should be considered a right. Second, the issue is one in which there is knowledge that concerns patterns and options readily available and relatively uncontroversial.

This means that informing citizens thoroughly and correctly prior to the consultation is possible and that deliberation can start from a platform of evidence. Third, sustainable consumption is an issue field in which political action is necessary at both the European and the member-state level. Market failures produce waiting games in which political intervention at multiple levels of governance is needed to create forward momentum. And lastly, sustainable consumption is an area in which choosing between policy options is an obviously normative, rather than merely technical, issue. The complex interdependencies involved in changing patterns of production and consumption mean that policy choices will have deep ethical, social and distributional effects. This makes the voices of diverse groups of citizens highly relevant since their input will likely foreshadow the reactions of the public at large.

Throughout the process of designing, organizing and carrying out the citizen consultation, politicians, policy makers and stakeholders have continuously been involved in identifying issues for deliberation and balancing sources of knowledge for the information material that was to be distributed to participating citizens. The process was thus supported by MPs, MEPs, Commission staff, NGOs with green and consumer agendas, researchers in the various fields, and interest organization representatives in retail and industry. The immediate purpose of this extensive pre-consultation involvement has been to ensure the direct policy relevance and overall soundness of the citizen consultations and their outputs. But the preparation process in itself has also served as a vehicle of informal dialogue across sectors and has contributed in many small ways to the formation of a common understanding and a common sense of urgency among diverse stakeholder groups. The willingness of politicians and policy-makers to open many of the meetings showed the political interest, which this process generated. The expressed interest of these end users of the citizen consultation made it clear to the participating citizens that the consultation was in fact much more than an academic exercise.

Consultation results

During the citizen consultation, data was collected in two ways. First, at the end of each thematic session, the citizens voted on a set of questions related to the strategies which they had touched upon in their

TABLE 8.1 *Europe Wide Views in numbers*

Participating countries	11
	Austria, Bulgaria, Catalonia (Spain), the Czech Republic, Denmark, Hungary, Ireland, Lithuania, the Netherlands, Portugal and Wallonia (Belgium)
Participating citizens	1035

deliberations. Second, at randomly selected tables, minute takers reported the views which citizens presented during deliberation.³

Generally, the outcomes of the consultation show that the citizens of Europe Wide Views accept the possibility of policy measures aimed at private consumption. Actually, they are strongly in favour of policy makers' taking ambitious steps in order to encourage more sustainable consumption in society. But it's not only policy makers who should take action; citizens also want to be involved in the process of striving towards a higher degree of sustainability in consumption.

Based on a thorough analysis of the quantitative as well as qualitative data, the EWViews partners have agreed on nine policy recommendations. Eight of the recommendations are directly linked to the citizens' views on how policy makers should act in order to achieve more sustainable consumption, while the last one has to do with the future use of citizen engagement in the EU. The nine policy recommendations are presented below in a random order:

- ▶ Set an ambitious European agenda to achieve more sustainable consumption.
- ▶ Perceive citizens as collaborators in striving towards sustainable consumption.
- ▶ Do not leave sustainable consumption solely to the market.
- ▶ Make sustainable consumption cheap and easy.
- ▶ Use financial policy instruments to foster sustainable consumption.
- ▶ Provide better eco-efficient alternatives to conventional car transport.
- ▶ Ensure longer durability of products.
- ▶ Raise awareness and educate citizens on how to consume sustainably.
- ▶ Engage European citizens in dialogue processes in the future.

The recommendations can be studied in greater detail in the policy report.⁴

Consulting citizens across Europe: a double question of trust and capacity

As already mentioned, the overall aim of the EWViews experiment went beyond the production of input for the concrete case of European sustainable consumption policy. The exercise was meant also to help build trust in such exercises in general and to spark capacity building among practitioners in the different European member states. The motivation has to do with the state-citizen interaction in Europe. The participation of citizens in policy- and decision-making is increasingly seen as a necessary component of modern democratic societies. Still, EU member states differ in motivations for engagement, in traditions for doing so, in the degree of interest among policy makers and in the perceived legitimacy of such exercises at the policy level. Thus, even if public engagement is a commonly hailed value across Europe, participation exercises do not always succeed in building social trust. This poses a challenge to organizers and champions of participatory processes. Designing successful citizens' participation processes requires thorough and transparent preparation, continuous communication, and mechanisms for follow-up monitoring and control.

Countries handle this challenge very differently. In some countries, public engagement has traditionally been strong and both policy makers and decision makers have frequently based decisions informed by citizens' consultation processes. A few, such as Austria, have frequently relied on referenda, rather than on separate institutions, to encourage the public's involvement in making the decisions themselves. In others, such as Denmark, public engagement traditions have been embedded in the way that specific public institutions are designed, and these traditions are evident in their missions and mandates. Such institutions have been successful in bridging scientific expertise, public deliberations and public opinions and in raising awareness of pending societal challenges, thus contributing to an enhanced policy process on complex and controversial issues.

As a rule, however, in countries without well-organized civil societies and where a closed political culture persists, citizens are only sporadically involved in isolated events and participation is dominated by conflicting reactions rather than proactive dialogue with stakeholders. In these more closed decision-making traditions, decision makers rarely rely on wider public input or simply mirror the demands of disorganized, anonymous

publics, without real dialogue, analysis or attention to possible impacts. Regrettably, this often translates into the feeling that citizens are being neglected by decision makers and are generally not welcome in the decision-making processes.⁵ This is where the build-up of trust in open deliberative processes through concrete experiences is most important and where the hands-on training of practitioners may provide the most value.

For Europe at large, even though traditions and situations vary among countries, seeking larger-scale citizens' involvement with issues that are highly controversial and often not fully understood by decision makers might help reduce complexity and at least help elaborate policy options that can be pursued with a realistic expectation of public acceptance. Organizing such exercises in a manner which coordinates national dialogues to form a European citizens' forum could be viewed as a necessary 'soft' reform of European institutional interaction and a step towards reducing the democratic deficit of the EU.

Lessons learned from EWViews

The consultation was successful across the countries that participated. Participating citizens demonstrated a high degree of support for deliberation and involvement in consulting decision makers. A large majority reported that they would like to see more consultations like the Europe Wide Views in the future, and they expressed that they would also take part in them if they received an invitation. These sentiments were echoed across Europe.

What is of special interest to the agenda of expanding TA is that in those countries without established TA institutions, the national events managed to stir up debate and create a focus on citizen engagement. Furthermore, the perceived legitimacy of the events was high due to the transparent process of consultation, which was perceived as trustworthy by participants and recipients alike. Most of the participating citizens reported that they for once felt included, and they were therefore pleased to express their opinion, as they knew it would be considered by policy makers.⁶

The EWViews method proved to travel well. Citizens' engagement in national deliberations was very lively in all countries. In part, this was due to the presence of skilful moderators, but to a much higher extent

to the fact that the participating citizens felt that they had a voice to be heard. They could, and often did, relate to their own experiences, and they provided numerous examples to support their arguments. All deliberations were markedly based on dialogue and respect, which contributed to the sense of accomplishment at the end of the day.

In terms of preparation, the greatest challenge turned out to be the recruitment of participants. Citizens in some countries remain very reluctant to share their opinions in public. Even among those who agreed to participate, some were hesitant at the beginning. The moderators, however, were prepared for such a challenge and helped create a very positive atmosphere at each table, helping citizens overcome their hesitation. Over time, the best remedy for this hesitancy will likely be further experiments that expose growing numbers of citizens to the participation experience, which would help to increase capacities and create a virtuous circle of growing trust among citizens in such processes.

Future perspectives and conclusions

The citizens' evaluation demonstrated that the consultation was successful. The overwhelming support for engaging citizens more in decision-making processes was equally present in countries with extensive as well as little experience with citizen-participation processes. A Walloon citizen expressed his support for more citizen engagement in the EU, in the following way:

Envision more frequent consultations of active citizens, of people wanting to take part in debates. Citizen dynamics such as this summit should be systematized.

Furthermore, the citizen consultation was also a success from a public-policy point of view. It has produced a set of very clear policy recommendations on how citizens think that policy makers should act in order to achieve a higher degree of sustainability in consumption. We hope that policy makers will make use of the unique insights into the views of ordinary citizens and will carefully consider them when formulating future policies that relate to sustainable consumption.

Additionally, the fact that the citizen consultation took place *simultaneously* in the eleven countries helped to give participants a sense of

being part of something bigger, that went far beyond the walls of their respective national meetings: a truly European event. Therefore, Europe Wide Views is also a way to emotionally minimize the distance between citizens across EU member states and hereby strengthen the European community.

To harvest these fruits, a more systematic use of similar methods for participation in the future could help build capacities and pave the way for both the formal and the informal acceptance of citizens' engagement within the governance institutions of Europe and its member states. Such systematic development would provide evidently added value from a European perspective.

Notes

- 1 National holidays meant that Czech and Hungarian meetings were held one week earlier.
- 2 For more information, visit <http://www.wvviews.org/>.
- 3 Minutes were taken in national languages and qualitative reports translated to English.
- 4 Policy report with results comparison functionality are available at www.citizenconsultation.pacitaproject.eu.
- 5 An opinion strongly expressed in Bulgaria, the Czech Republic and Hungary during the national EWViews consultation on 25 October 2014.
- 6 This was particularly evident in Hungary and Bulgaria.



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