

**ASSESSMENT AND IMPACT
OF THE RAISE CITIZENS' CONFERENCE**

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The Context

Citizen participation in policy-making is of major importance for modern democracies. The failure to involve citizens in decisions which affect their daily lives contributes to the growing dissatisfaction with the European Union and political institutions more generally. This phenomenon can be witnessed across all EU Member States. The RAISE Citizens' Conference set a sign in the opposite direction. It provided a select number of citizens the opportunity to evaluate and test the acceptability of the research outcomes of the "City of Tomorrow and Culture Heritage" programme of the 5th RTD Framework. The RAISE Citizens' Conference established a 'public space' for European citizens to discuss policies for a better quality of life in urban areas. The format of a citizens' conference used in RAISE is transferable to other policy areas. Furthermore, a citizens' conference is not restricted to policies with a European dimension: it can be also applied at the national, regional or local levels to support citizen input into policy decisions..

The Selection Process

The process of selecting participants to the RAISE Citizens' Conference was very successful. Application forms were sent out to several city networks, cities, citizens' organisations as well as NGOs with the request to forward these to their members. The response was remarkable: the project team received more than 570 applications. Even though applications were unevenly distributed across Member States, the project team received at least ten applications from each Member State. This was important in the selection process which was based on quantitative (age, gender, occupation, education, etc) and qualitative (three open questions in the application form) criteria.

Participation to the RAISE Citizens' Conference was restricted to 26 persons, and this of course meant that the group could not be representative of European citizens across countries and social strata in the statistical sense. Nevertheless, an attempt was made to select participants from different professional and socio-economic backgrounds. This was achieved only to a certain extent: our participants represented different professions but had all a comparatively high educational background and a secure economic basis. We think that this has to do mainly with three aspects: First, the application forms were sent out electronically via email or could be filled out on the RAISE internet homepage. This means that a bias towards citizens which have easy access to a computer in their work or at home was built into the selection process. Second, eligibility for participation was tied to a solid knowledge of the English language. Third, the theme of EU research and policy-making as such is more likely to attract people with a higher educational background or active in professions that directly or indirectly relate to this topic. These, in turn, are persons that are more likely to be interested in the European integration project, even if not necessarily in favour. This was evident in the answers to the open questions of the application forms and could also be observed during the introductory session at the beginning of the preparatory meetings.

The motives of the citizens to take part in the citizens' conference process were manifold: many expressed a genuine interest in European politics and policies; others stated that they were primarily motivated by the prospect of deliberating with fellow European citizens on matters of general public interest; some were attracted by the opportunity to visit three major European cities over a short period of time. The principal characteristic of the participants was however curiosity coupled with a strong commitment to learning from deliberation with others and contributing to the citizens' conference process. This was facilitated by the overall good proficiency in English and socialising with each other was an easy task for the whole group.

The Citizens' Conference Process

The general idea of a citizens' conference is that citizens come together to deliberate on an issue of common (public) concern in order to produce a common output. In the case of the RAISE project, the common output is the Citizens' Declaration. Producing a common output necessitates reaching some kind of consensus or compromise among the participants. This cannot happen without discussions and interactions among the citizens.

From the beginning of the three preparatory meetings during September and October 2005 – that took place in Vienna, Rome and Brussels respectively – there was a strong demand from the group of citizens for discussion among each other. This deliberative set-up is an important factor for a citizens' conference process: citizens should have the feeling and trust that they themselves 'drive' the agenda and not alone 'abide' to rules established by externals. An important success factor for a citizens' conference is that the latter represents a *democratic process*. Therefore, a citizens' conference process should allow extensive time for discussions in sub-groups and also at the panel level.

A citizens' conference process is extremely demanding. Participants – who, on average, are not experts of the particular field they deliberate – are expected to concentrate during the conference while receiving a lot of new information. Therefore, they should be given the time and space to process this information. The format of the RAISE Citizens' Conference entailed three preparatory meetings which lasted two days each. The moderator – a consortium member of the RAISE team – tried to allocate as much time as possible to discussion and deliberation.

The role of the moderator in any citizens' conference process is of great importance. The moderator must ensure that the time plan is kept but also that everyone has adequate time to express their views, that the discussions are not dominated

by one single participant, that even those not keen to talk are encouraged to do so, etc. An important success factor for a citizens' conference is that a sentiment of trust is established between the participants and the moderator. However, it does not have to be the moderator who always answers the questions posed by the participants. It is usual in citizens' conferences to call in experts. Both the moderator and the experts should be adequately prepared, keeping in mind how important it is to communicate things in a user-friendly way to the citizens. This means to use short and everyday language, i.e. avoiding jargon as much as possible. Whenever certain specific terms – e.g. stakeholder, governance – are introduced, they should be explained. It should not be assumed that citizens know these expert terms.

During the preparatory meetings, the citizens could consult several experts in order to receive more detailed information on certain aspects of their work. At each meeting, experts gave a short presentation about their practical work. Thereafter, the citizens were able to specifically ask questions or receive background information on issues of their interest. One could observe that the interaction with the experts were of great value for the citizens. The interaction with experts enabled citizens to obtain both in-depth information about certain aspects of urban sustainable development and practical examples of sustainable development policy-making. The citizens could reflect upon and compare the presented case studies with the situation in their own cities and their own life experiences.

The process of drafting the Citizens' Declaration started during the last preparatory meeting in Brussels in October 2005. The citizens were given the time, space and also the help of consortium members of the project to develop a format, concept and a first outline of the Declaration. The citizens were split into four groups, according to the four topics they were working on. Two groups could already develop a draft version of their part, the other two remained at more preliminary stages. It was decided that the four groups will continue their work on the Declaration via email and the citizens' area, a discussion forum that has been established on the RAISE project homepage.

Potential Impacts of the Citizens' Conference Process

The citizens' conference process provided the participants the opportunity to create their '*own learning space*' for interacting and deliberating. In what follows, we outline some of the main lessons that emerged out of this learning space.

The citizens objected to the view of sustainability as an 'add-on' element to policies in reaction to citizens' concerns. They expressed several times that sustainable development is a valuable concept that should be the basis for decisions and integrated approaches from the onset of policy planning.

Urban sustainable development involves several components, some of which are specialized and technology-oriented. The RAISE Citizens' Conference revealed that the challenges of urban sustainable development need to be operationalised within multidisciplinary networks which cooperate and interact not only with each other, but also with research organizations, innovation support institutions, relevant financial institutions and regional/local government bodies.

The interaction of the citizens with public authorities from different government levels revealed the need for science-based policy approaches towards urban sustainable development. Such an approach could help public authorities to focus on 'knowledge for action' as basis for policy-making. The experience with urban sustainable development suggests the further development of an integrated approach in policy-making, based on sound scientific knowledge in order to develop coherent urban development strategies and to propose advanced technology-oriented solutions.

While deliberating the issue of urban sustainable development, the citizens expressed the need to reflect intellectually, emotionally and socially upon sustainable development and policy processes in order to fully understand the concept and its meaning in practice. The citizens expressed several negative experiences they made in relation to what they refer to as rapid economic growth and social modernisation. This is an important aspect which refers to the Lisbon Strategy of the European Union and the need to establish the European Single Market. The citizens expressed their wish to consolidate the objective of economic growth with the need to solve social problems in Europe.

The objectives of the Lisbon Strategy were often raised during the deliberations of the Citizens' Conference. The citizens, while working intensively on the Citizens' Declaration, experienced the importance of striking the right balance between urban development, environmental protection and the Lisbon objectives of growth and job creation. It was the aim of the citizens to draft the text of the Citizens' Declaration with awareness of the policy issues emerging from the Lisbon Strategy.

The citizens' expressed the view that the link between EU-funded research projects on urban sustainable development and the dissemination of their outcomes is not satisfactory. They also identified not sufficient impact of research outcomes in urban areas and the improvement of the quality of life in cities. Therefore, the question emerged as to the relation between research projects and their potential impact on the ground. How can potentially important research outcomes influence urban policy-making? The complex inter-relationship between research funding, research outcomes, policy-making, different societal interests and implementation is clearly a matter of high priority. A further discussion of this issues is necessary, also in order to show how research efforts can inform policy decisions. Again, a 'knowledge for action' approach should be further explored.

During the preparatory meetings of the citizens conference, a constantly growing learning process among the citizens could be observed. After initial problems of making themselves familiar with the topic and process of a citizens' conference, the participants developed a dynamic role in the process. Therefore, a citizens' conference process can trigger a learning process among the participating citizens regarding the concept of sustainable development, the outcomes of EU funded research projects as well as the complexities of policy-making in an urban context.

It could be observed that during the citizens' conference process, the citizens felt increasingly like experts, imitating an expert's way of working towards problem solution. Perhaps this is the case because of the following reasons: First, the citizens learned important insights about technological/process related issues in the different policy fields (transport, urban governance, environment, cultural heritage) As a result, they felt increasingly more self-confident in expressing detailed sector-oriented opinions. Secondly, the citizens – perhaps also sub-consciously – tried to imagine the experts' task and to become equal partners in the process. Therefore, involving citizens in policy-making processes can increase their competencies on the topics of concern as well as their self-confidence towards participation in decision processes.

Overall, the citizens had a difficult task during the citizens' conference process: They had to accommodate to a new format of deliberation; make themselves familiar with a challenging and complex thematic; and find ways to communicate, discuss and summarise their views in a single document, the Citizens' Declaration. We are aware of their efforts and challenging task. We would like to congratulate them for their work.