

The RAISE project – a participant's view (Draft)

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Abstract

As part of the European Union's strategy on sustainable development, in 2005 the European Commission funded the RAISE project, under the 6th Framework Programme. The aim of the project was to raise the awareness and test the acceptance and usability of EU-funded research on urban sustainability. The core of the project was the organisation of a Citizens' Conference involving 26 citizens, one from each of the member states and Romania (a candidate country). The conference process consisted of three two-day workshops, on the basis of which the citizen representatives produced a *Citizens' Declaration on the City of Tomorrow*, which was presented to the European Commission and Parliament in Brussels on December 5th.

Participants were chosen at random from an e-mail call for applicants, and were provided with information on research, through reports and presentations made at the first two workshops, under the headings of Urban Governance, Sustainable Transport, Built Environment and Cultural Heritage. Communicating via email and an on-line discussion forum, and at a third workshop, the participants worked together to produce the Citizens' Declaration.

This paper will describe the process and outcome of the Citizens' Conference, as experienced by the participants, and the main findings as expressed by the Citizens' Declaration. One of the most significant outcomes of this experiment in public consultation was the level of good will, motivation and community spirit among the participants, and the life-changing impact of the experience

Introduction

In 2005, a remarkable and innovative exercise in public consultation was carried out under the auspices of the European Commission 6th Framework Programme, within the sub-priority on Global Change and Ecosystems. The RAISE project, implemented by a consortium of five research organizations from across Europe (Belgium, Italy, Austria, Romania and Poland), was the practical embodiment of

the second strand of the European Union's strategy on sustainable development, as stated by the Gothenburg Council in 2001. The three major strands of the strategy are:

- to recognise the importance of inter-relationships between the social, environmental and economic aspects of sustainable development;
- *to improve the way policy is made to take into account the wider global context and the role of citizens and business;*
- and to address a number of specific trends, such as wasteful energy use, land use and transport. (COM, 2001).

The main aims of The RAISE project were to raise awareness and assess the acceptability and usability of results achieved by EU research projects on urban sustainability, by asking the 'end users' of the research – that is, citizens of Europe – for their views. The method for achieving this was a Citizens' Conference involving 26 citizens, one from each of the 25 EU Member States and Romania (a candidate country). The participants, who were selected at random, were chosen as 'lay people', not technical experts or policy makers. They were asked to formulate their views on the 'City of Tomorrow'; on the value of the approaches and solutions coming from EU research findings in the 'City of Tomorrow and Cultural Heritage' key area; and on how research could be improved and made more relevant to the general public. They were to develop these views in a series of three preparatory workshops in Vienna, Rome and Brussels, and to express them in a Citizens' Declaration, to be presented to the European Commission and Parliament in December 2005.

This paper will describe not only the process by which this was achieved, and the outcome of the project, but the personal experience of the author, as the UK representative on the Citizens' Panel.

The call for participants

My involvement with the RAISE project began with an email which I received in March 2005, asking for participants. The email directed me to a website where there was an on-line application form. The eligibility criteria were:

- to be a citizen of an EU country;
- to have an excellent command of English and access to email and the Internet;
- to be available on the meeting dates;
- and to have no direct personal or professional stake in urban development.

I completed the application and sent it off without much expectation.

In May 2005, I received an email with a link to the results of the selection process, where I was surprised to see my name in the list of second choices. A few days later, I received a phone call to say that the woman who was the first choice from the UK had had to withdraw, and asking if I was still able to take part.

In total, 570 responses were received, including 20 from countries not currently in the EU, of which 13 were from the candidate country of Romania. The organizers decided to include Romania in the process, so there were ultimately

26 citizens altogether. One citizen was chosen from the applicants for each country, according to a random sampling procedure which ensured that the demographic profile of the final selection matched that of the overall population of applicants. A substitute candidate, who matched the profile of the selected candidate, was also chosen for each country, in case the first candidate was unable to attend.

One point made by the organizers was that the pool of applicants, predictably, had a higher level of education than the European average, with 88% holding a university degree. While acknowledging that '*...their views cannot be taken as representative of the truly lay citizens in Europe*', the organizers argued that, as their aim was not to carry out an experiment in direct democracy per se, but to evaluate awareness and acceptance of City of Tomorrow research results, they felt that this bias towards more highly educated people, likely to be more aware of and interested in research findings, was acceptable.

The workshops

After confirming my availability and commitment to the Citizens' Conference, I received a further email in July 2005, with preparatory reading for the first workshop in Vienna.

The preparatory document, of 46 pages with a 59 page annex, laid out the aims and procedures of the project, and what was expected of the participants:

They will be asked to formulate their view on the acceptance and use of selected urban sustainability approaches, technologies and solutions coming from EU research findings.

The document described the EU's Sustainable Development Strategy, and the role of research, particularly the Key Action 'City of Tomorrow and Cultural Heritage'.

As part of the Research Programme supported by the European Commission, it utilises the full potential of science and technology to help develop new tools, approaches or methodologies that will enable truly sustainable policies to be defined and implemented.

The main task of the RAISE Citizen panel was identified as being to envisage the "city of tomorrow", and consider ways in which the results of EU urban research can be used to help improve its attractiveness and sustainability

The key question is not simply to evaluate various aspects of cities, but to suggest how local governments can make a city attractive and sustainable, and how EU urban research can help to this purpose.

In the course of the first two workshops, the citizen participants were to be presented with a selection of projects and results from EU research projects of the 5th and 6th Framework Programme for Research & Development, based around 4 main areas:

- urban management and governance,
- cultural heritage,

- sustainable transport
- and sustainable built environment.

From the information presented in the first two workshops, augmented by their own experience and discussions, and from additional documentation provided by the organisers, the panel were asked to produce a Citizens' Declaration on the City of Tomorrow, which would be worked on during the third workshop and through online discussions, and presented to the European Commission and Parliament at the final meeting in Brussels in December 2005. The design and format of the Declaration were left largely to the discretion of the participants, with the proviso that it should be between two and ten pages.

The first workshop, predictably, focused on introducing the participants to the process, and to each other. The workshops were planned to include presentations from stakeholders and policy makers, interspersed with small group activities and discussions. This did not always go smoothly, particularly in the first workshop. At first the participants were unclear over what was being asked of them, and some of the presentations were perceived as being very technocratic and confusing. The process was designed to be as interactive as possible, given that the aim was to produce a declaration of which the citizen participants would take ownership. The process was fluid, with the organizers taking on board comments from the participants.

Given the amount of material to be assimilated, and the shortage of time available, the sessions were necessarily very intense. Much of the discussion was done workshop-style in small groups to gauge initial responses to the

presentations, each group then reporting back to the whole group for a wider discussion. The participants were asked to draw heavily not just on the material presented to them, but also their own experience and vision of what they wanted from their cities.

At the end of the first workshop, the participants were asked to divide into 5 working groups of 5-6 people each, one for each of the four substantive areas described above, and one to take responsibility for the production of the final Declaration.

One comment made by the organisers in their assessment of the project was that over time the citizens came to behave more like experts. Although the citizens understandably asked for simple explanations, such explanations could not do justice to the inherent complexity of the subjects being discussed. In a sense this is a circle which cannot be squared. Only by becoming in part 'experts' themselves did the citizens become enabled to evaluate the material and make reasoned judgments.

Throughout the process, there was a great emphasis on individual commitment and action. Participants were asked to reflect on how they felt they had been changed by the experience, how their attitudes had changed and what, if any, changes they had made to their behaviour.

The Declaration

The production of the declaration led to intense and occasionally heated, though never acrimonious, discussions, both face to face in Brussels and online. A

forum for the discussions was set up on the project website: <http://www.raise-eu.org>.

The Brussels workshop allowed the participants to clarify what was to be included in the Declaration. Having been given a free choice over format, the participants decided that each of the four sub-groups specialising in the 4 substantive areas should produce a section of 2 pages each, while the Declaration subgroup developed the introduction and conclusions. Initial drafts were far longer than could be accommodated, and led to heated online debates. Drafts were circulated through the forum, via email, and also using an online text development packaged called 'Writely', which was suggested by one of the participants. Drafts were thrashed out among the subgroups, sent out to the general group for comments, and also to the consortium, who produced a final text and design, which all participants were able and encouraged to comment on. The full declaration ran to 9 pages, which can be viewed on the website. An A3 3-fold summary version was also produced.

Throughout the process, there was a tension between discussing, describing and debating all the things we had learnt through the project and the ideas and feelings which we brought with us from our experience. There was a tension also between wanting to include all the ideas we had learned and generated between ourselves, and producing a statement which would be 'punchy' and memorable.

The main conclusions were expressed in the Declaration as follows:

On the four main substantive areas:

- *The voice of the citizens, including those who have been marginalized in the past, must be incorporated into urban governance in both the old and new EU member states. Trust can only flourish if it is mutual; only if our leaders are prepared to listen to and respect our views will the people reciprocate and take responsibility for their own actions.*
- *A radical change in transport habits is required in order to facilitate change towards more sustainable transport use: technical solutions by themselves will not solve the problems of sustainability.*
- *Greater sustainable built environment depends on our moving beyond a consumption-driven society in which 'new' is always seen as superior to 'old'. We must learn the value of reusing what we already have, rather than discarding it in favour of novelty, whether that means the renovation of housing stock, the reclamation of brownfield sites, the retention and repair of consumer goods or the recycling of materials.*
- *Equally, we need to focus on the sustainable integration of cultural heritage in everyday life, encouraging people to feel ownership for, and appreciate the importance of, our diverse and shared cultural heritage.*

General comments applicable across all the areas:

- *There is an urgent need for greater awareness and education on sustainability, and the implications if we continue on our present unsustainable course. Often our choices are made on the basis of*

insufficient information, without an understanding of the true hidden costs of our actions. If we have participation on issues and give a clear view of the implications of the choice, people can make those choices to make a difference in their daily lives.

- *Often it is the most local, small scale initiatives which are most successful, drawing people in and helping them make a commitment to producing visible improvements in their daily lives. The slogan: 'Think global, Act local', is not just a cliché.*
- *Conversely, experience in one area can often be applied elsewhere. Across our community, we have an enormous range of expertise and knowledge of 'what works and what doesn't'. Failure to disseminate this knowledge more widely is a missed opportunity (RAISE, 2005).*
- *The inevitable limitations on the number of areas which we were able to consider, left us frustrated that we were not able to consider other areas vital to sustainable development, such as energy policy and biodiversity.*

Finally, a statement of our vision:

- *We all live on a small planet with finite resources. The way in which those resources have been and are being used endangers the chances of an acceptable quality of life for us, our children and grandchildren and their contemporaries throughout the world.*

- *We can and must take action as individuals to reduce the destructive impacts of our lifestyles, but we need the support and examples of our leaders and our fellow-citizens.*
- *We recognize that action must begin in our own neighbourhoods and cities. However, we are also part of a wider world, and we must look beyond our own borders and short term time horizons.*
- *We can each make changes in our own way which can feed back into our communities, societies, and countries, starting a process for a better future.*

The Declaration was presented twice on December 5th, in the morning at the European Commission to an audience including representatives of stakeholder organisations, and in the afternoon at the European Parliament. All MEPs were invited to attend, and members of the citizens' panel wrote to their own MEPs inviting them personally. A press conference was also held, and participants strove to publicise the event in their own national and local media.

Conclusions and personal reflections

This paper is a 'participant's view', and I will sum up by giving my personal responses to the project .

The most striking outcome was the strong bonds which formed between the members of the group, expressed in the Declaration as follows:

The interaction in our group made us realize that we have many things in common. For this reason, we consider ourselves to be European citizens

and we believe that cooperation between Europeans is possible and indispensable.

Individually we may feel we can do little, but through our collective conscience we may encourage each other to do more and change our behavior in some ways.

If we as a group of twenty six people who came together as strangers can learn from each other and change our lives, it is possible for other groups to do the same. Our group gives evidence of generating a global dynamic.

The main practical issues which struck me from the process, and which were also reflected in the group findings stated in the declaration, were as follows:

- The importance of communication between the Commission, the researchers, politicians and citizens – and the difficulty of achieving that, even with goodwill on all sides.
- The amount of good research which has been and is being done, and the need for sharing knowledge of what works and best practice.
- The importance of local involvement for the success of sustainability.

The presentation of the Citizens' Declaration at the European Commission and the European Parliament was exhilarating and emotional, but also frustrating.

The most striking issues to emerge during that day were:

- The degree of closeness and involvement which had developed between the people involved in the project, and how remarkable this must appear to people from outside the project.
- The sheer scale of the bureaucracy entailed in the 'governance' of a whole continent, and the dangers and difficulties of trying to get our voices heard against the weight of existing lobbying interests, indifference and inertia.

The usefulness of the process will depend on how the outcomes are responded to. The 'loop' must be closed, so that not only the researchers but the policy makers behind them understand the significance of the findings, and act on them. More generally, the process should be tried at all levels, from the most local upwards.

The danger is that the boundaries have only been moved by an infinitesimal fraction. The fact that participants began to behave more like 'experts' demonstrates the importance of education. For these 26 people, their interest, understanding and engagement changed immeasurably. Personally, my whole attitude towards the European community changed, in that I now feel far more 'at home' as a member of the European community than I have felt in the past. The levels of goodwill and emotional commitment between the participants were an amazing testimony to the ability of people to reach out to other people as individuals.

However, there is a question of how do we reach out and involve the people who have not been through that process. Given the level of commitment, energy and sheer hard graft expected from the participants, if this is what is necessary to

bring about a transformation of attitudes, it is hard to see how this can be carried sufficiently far. How can we try to carry forward this process of education to those people who are not able or willing to make that level of commitment?

The RAISE project and Citizens' Declaration offer the European Commission a mirror, an infinitesimal and partial reflection of the view from outside. If the question is: 'how are EU policies and research results perceived by the citizens?' the answer, sadly, must be 'often, not at all'. One of the initial reactions for most of the participants was that they had previously been unaware of the 140 projects being undertaken in the 'City of Tomorrow' programme. This is despite the fact that dissemination of results is recognized as a crucial part of research, yet this highly educated and engaged group of people had little knowledge of it. Some discussion in the workshops focused on ways of addressing this, on recruiting the media and employing marketing techniques to 'sell' the research to the public.

The project had the effect of raising the awareness and engagement of this particular group of 26 citizens. Clearly it would not be feasible for every citizen of Europe to be involved in such an exercise. However, repeating similar exercises on a smaller, more local scale would perhaps offer the opportunity of achieving some of the aims of bringing research closer to the community, and addressing the issues of education and improved urban governance highlighted in the Citizens' Declaration.

References

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