

# The Danish consensus conference model in Switzerland and France: on the importance of framing the issue

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## Introduction

In Spring 1998, a Swiss and a French official institution each organised a national deliberative technology assessment (TA) procedure based on the model of the Danish consensus conference. In May 1998, the Swiss Center for TA organised a 'PubliForum' on 'Electricity and Society'. A month later, the French Office Parlementaire d'Evaluation des Choix Scientifiques et Technologiques (OPECST) organised a 'Conférence de Citoyens' on 'Genetic modification in agriculture and food'.

In each country, this procedure, the first of its kind organised at national level, came as a major surprise for different reasons. Although France worships the notion of citizenship, hence the expression 'Citizens' conference', it is an extremely centralised state, in which decisions on technological development are usually taken by the so-called 'technocracy'. The French civil nuclear programme to produce electricity provides an insight into how powerful this technocracy is.

On the other hand, Switzerland has developed a sophisticated system of democracy at all levels. The idea of adding a consultative process to reach yet another consensus on an issue of public matter, albeit on science and technology, therefore appeared unnecessary to most observers of Swiss political life. Hence the word 'PubliForum' was preferred. The referendum on genetic engineering, which took place in June 1998, gives an idea of the level of direct democracy Switzerland has reached.

Despite differences in these two countries' democratic institutions and traditions, both the French OPECST and the Swiss Center for TA nevertheless felt the model of the consensus conference could improve public debate on science and technology. However, in comparing the two initiatives, this paper shows that the democratic content of consensus conferences is highly dependent on the initial framing of the issue.

## The Swiss PubliForum on electricity and society

The paper argues that the way the organisers of the PubliForum on electricity and society framed the issue sets

a model to be followed. The Board of Directors of the Swiss Center for TA named a steering committee comprising ten stakeholders to supervise the PubliForum with a balanced representation of private and public interests with regards to electricity in Switzerland.

This committee defined eleven topics for deliberation and asked a professional journalist to write fact-sheets on each one of them. Then it checked the neutrality of these sheets before sending them to the citizens two weeks before the first preparatory weekend.

The eleven topics covered by the fact-sheets were :

- technology assessment;
- the nature of energy;
- the different types of electric factories;
- the structure of the Swiss electricity market;
- the relative annual contribution, in Switzerland, of the different means of producing electricity (nuclear energy, fossil fuel, hydroelectric power, others);
- a forecast of the demand for electricity in Switzerland;
- the liberalisation of the electricity market;
- the efficient utilisation of electricity;
- the politics of energy in Switzerland;
- an outlook on the different technologies to produce electricity (including from renewable energy); and,
- criteria for judging the solutions for the future of the structure of the Swiss electricity production system.

The sheets cover the whole technical, economic and political contexts within which electricity is produced. The citizens were also presented with criteria, albeit broad, to help them choose between the options at stake. Thus, not only the range of options was presented to them, but also the means of dealing with this choice.

During the preparatory weekends, the citizens had access to documentation published by different lobbies. Furthermore, an academic summarised 30 years of controversy in the politics of energy and an ex-director of the Federal Office of Energy presented the structure of the electricity production system in Switzerland. At the end of the public hearing, during which the 27 citizens heard evidence given by 20 experts, they presented their conclusions in nine chapters of their report. The chapter

headings of this report are noted below.

1. Electricity and the environment
2. Radioactive waste management
3. Ethics
4. Energy saving
5. Renewable forms of energy and alternatives
6. The liberalisation of the electricity market
7. External cost
8. Taxes on energy
9. International co-ordination.

### Some key characteristics of the report

Chapters one and three introduce the issue, chapter two makes a special case of radioactive waste management, chapters four and five investigate energy efficiency and alternatives, whilst the remaining four chapters explore the general economic framework within which the citizens came up with recommendations.

It is particularly noteworthy that the citizens introduce their report with the clearly defined goal '*to satisfy the long term demand in energy in a sustainable way*' which gives coherence to the entire report. In setting this goal, the citizens put themselves in a position to exercise their right to choose amongst different energy options. In terms of the goal and criteria selected by the citizens, neither the use of nuclear energy nor that of fossil fuel are satisfactory. Therefore, neither of these energy options are acceptable to the citizens at the end of the day.

In their introduction, the citizens also take full account of the upcoming liberalisation of the electricity market and the associated freedom of choice it leads to. Having explored the economic structure of the electricity market, they conclude it drives Switzerland away from sustainability. Consequently, their report explores mechanisms that can favour an optimal use of electricity and research investments in technologies that use renewable forms of energy to produce electricity.

Chapter four lists a series of recommendations to save energy. For example, funding private industries to help them acquire the financial ability to develop innovative energy saving products; giving citizens the ability to financially support such projects through new innovation grants; and finally, promoting information on such possibilities.

In chapter five, the citizens say how shocked they are by how little is invested in research on the use of renewable forms of energy. Having reached some understanding of the causes behind this imbalance, they ask for this investment to be increased. They then further explore the state of the art of several technologies that use renewable energy to produce electricity: hydroelectricity, geothermal power and photosynthesis, as well as ways to improve the storage and transport of electricity.

### Criteria by which to judge this PubliForum positively

By bringing together technological, economic and political factors which all influence electricity production and use, this procedure allowed citizens to define a goal, that of the sustainable long term production of energy, which enabled them to reflect on the advantages and disadvantages of a range of options to produce electricity. The procedure also enabled them to take into account the economic constraints that weigh on these options and pull society away from those which can help reach the goal they gave themselves.

### The French 'Conférence de Citoyens'

The French Citizens' conference did not follow the model set by the Swiss. The OPECST gave the responsibility of supervising the conference on 'GMOs in agriculture and food' to a steering committee of seven civil servants, including six researchers. This group put together a press file but did not have time to send it to the citizens before the first preparatory weekend. The steering committee recruited eleven experts, most of whom were researchers directly involved with GMOs, who were each to give a one-hour course on one of ten topics. Citizens were lectured on the following:

- evolution of crop production during the last ten years;
- industrial techniques to prepare and process food;
- principles of nutrition;
- basic elements of genetics;
- plant breeding and transgenesis;
- national and international legal context;
- environmental issues;
- health issues;
- agricultural issues; and,
- food sector issues.

A part of the French scientific élite directly involved in GMO research gave an intensive course to the citizens. Gene technology was presented as a central inevitable fact, rather than as one option amongst many to produce food. The 13 citizens heard no less than 28 experts give evidence. At the end of the public audition, the citizen panel presented their conclusions in a report made up of five chapters.

1. Health
2. Economy
3. Environment
4. Law
5. Politics

### Some key characteristics of the report

There is no introduction to the report. No goal is defined. At one point, the citizens express their support of GMOs '*so that the country will not lag behind other countries*' and their endorsement of that industry, so that France would remain competitive. The citizen report asks for

more research on ecological risks to be carried out and demands that no large-scale dissemination of GMOs takes place before reassuring data is produced. Until potential risks for human health are better assessed, a minority of citizens recommends the introduction of a moratorium on the commercialisation of GMOs.

The citizens further require that risk analysis be performed by 'competent and independent experts' working in public laboratories and conclude that '*the Government must increase its funding of public research in France*'. Here, it should be recalled that most of the individuals who lectured the citizens were civil servants working in national research centres all affected by cutbacks in Government funding of public research.

### Criteria by which to judge this PubliForum negatively

Unlike the PubliForum on electricity, the 'Conférence de Citoyens' focused on gene technology in the food sector and largely ignored other means of food production. Moreover, neither were the economic and political factors, which influence the issue, discussed in depth.

The citizens were thus not encouraged to explore the range of choices that exist in farming. The issue was framed in such a way that there was little space for the analysis of other constraints citizens should take into account, so as to support a more ambitious goal. Instead, the process tended to focus on the concept of national competition. Citizens were not given the chance to reflect on the vices and virtues of food production options within an understanding of the economic structure that may result in the outcomes driving society away from the common good.

At this stage, if one agrees with this analysis, a question emerges. Was the Swiss success the outcome of a more sophisticated democratic tradition? Was the French failure the outcome of a technocratic arrogant attitude? Since no other consensus conference has taken place on electricity, it is possible to answer this question by taking a look at the other consensus conferences on GMOs which were recently organised at national level.

### Nine consensus conferences on GM in crops and food between 1994 and 1999

Between November 1994 and June 1999, no less than nine Consensus conferences took place in the industrialised world. The nine consensus conferences on GM were: UK (November 1994), New Zealand (August 1996), Norway (January 1997), France (June 1998), Australia (March 1999), Denmark (March 1999), Canada (March 1999), New Zealand (May 1999), and Switzerland (June 1999).

Franziska Schwab, of the Swiss Council of Science, discusses in a report whether the Swiss PubliForum on GM constitutes a special case or whether it falls in line with the other cases which took place on this subject. This author notes that all nine reports appear '*surprisingly homogeneous. Since they are the outcome of the same procedure, the fact that they are similarly conceived is not surprising*', she argues. '*What is more surprising is that the contents of the reports are similar*', she concludes.

This conclusion is disputable. If different consensus conferences are framed in a similar way, why should it be surprising that their outcomes are similar? On the other hand, what appears surprising is that, despite the success of the first PubliForum, the Swiss Center for TA did not follow the model it set and chose, rather, to frame the PubliForum on GM crops and food as elsewhere in the industrial world.

The Swiss TA named a steering committee of fifteen members with a balanced representation of stakeholders with regards to GMOs in Switzerland. This committee asked a journalist to write fact-sheets on nine topics. The committee could not agree on the neutrality of the sheets on three topics: environment, health and economy. Thus, each camp produced its own view on these topics and the file was sent to the citizens before the first preparatory weekend.

The nine topics of the fact-sheets were as follows: technology assessment; ethics and genetic engineering; security, utility and ethics: criteria for assessing the products derived from GMOs; what GMOs can be found in shops? where are the GMOs? law and politics; GMOs and health; GMOs and the environment; and the economy of GMOs.

During the first preparatory weekend, three experts further instructed the citizens on the basic principles of genetics, on the legal state of affairs of gene technology in food production and on ethical issues. After having heard 18 experts during the public audition, 28 citizens drafted their report in the following six chapters: 1. research; 2. ecosystem; 3. health; 4. ethics; 5. economy; and 6. law and application.

### Some key characteristics of the report

The chapters are very broad, similar to that of the French report described earlier, with a chapter specifically devoted to research. There is no introduction to the report. GM appears as a central issue to be dealt with, independent of a general goal.

- The basic scenario of the report, regarding research, is close to that of the French example.
- There is a need to remain competitive in the international market thanks to Research & Development (R&D) which favours gene technology.

- There is a need to assess the risk related to the consequence of this R&D.
- It is impossible to trust researchers from the private sector to provide neutral recommendations and there is thus a State duty to fund researchers working in the public sector in order to fulfil this task.

The citizens were not led to think in terms of choice between different options to deal with today's agriculture in the context of a specified goal. The procedure did not help them to compare and reflect on the existing options. They were not encouraged to tackle the GMO issue within an understanding of what vision of the common good could frame their reflection.

## Why did none of the nine conferences on GMOs follow the model of the first PubliForum ?

Part of the answer is that the PubliForum on electricity was in fact unusual. Consensus conferences tend to follow a classic TA framework, which aims at examining the pros and cons of isolated technologies in terms of their general social and economic consequences. Hence, the question should be reversed: what made the first PubliForum possible? The answer is: the topic, in two ways.

At one level, intense campaigning on the system of electricity production has taken place over the past 30 years. During this time, a lot of options and scenarios have been elaborated and explored. Moreover, the threat of global warming on future generations and, perhaps, of climate change, which arises as a result of the consumption of fossil fuel, is now clearly established. Radioactive waste management also appears to be one of the trickiest socio-technical issues industrialised societies face. By contrast, gene technology is suddenly taking everyone by surprise and has not yet caused any obvious environmental damage.

But the topic helped in a deeper way: the fact is that electricity is not a technology, but a product; a technical product, but a product all the same. Hence, electricity as an issue is not equivalent to gene technology, but to food.

## Conclusion: the model of the first PubliForum to gene technology can be applied to any technology

The concluding hypothesis here is that it is possible to organise any consensus conference on the model of the PubliForum on electricity. It is indeed possible to frame any issue around a product in order to display the various means to produce it. A consensus conference bringing into play genetic engineering along the lines of the first PubliForum, would be on 'Food production and Society'.

Such a framing has already successfully been put together in the Citizen Foresight model. Here are glimpses of why this could prove useful.

When citizens or social actors are invited to take part in a deliberative TA experience, it does not appear worthy to simply expect them to be good students who learn technical lessons from experts. Rather, what can be of tremendous help is to understand how their values and representations will weigh on the acceptability attached to the technologies which are at stake in the procedure. By bringing their values and representations into play, instructed citizens, in the course of a well-framed consensus conference, are likely to conceive one or several ambitious goals and to come up with imaginative propositions in order to reach it or them.

A consensus conference framed around food production could, for instance, lead citizens to come up with a goal such as sustainable agriculture or local food security (meaning not the absence of toxicity but the ability of populations to produce their own food). In order to choose from the various ways of producing food, the questions would be : which of them should prove better at achieving this or that goal? And if the most favoured options for those purposes are more expensive, then the citizens are likely to try to find out economic mechanisms that could promote these options in the way they could promote the use of renewable forms of energy to produce electricity.

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