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Hearing the real voices: exploring the experiences of the European Citizens' Panel

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Introduction

Citizens' panels were set up in regions of England and Ireland to discuss the future of rural areas. In 2006, these panels sent representatives to a larger panel at the European Parliament in Brussels, Belgium. These European Citizens' Panels were made up of 86 citizens from ten regions of Europe.

The English and Irish panels

The English regional panel consisted of 15 adults and 15 young people aged between 13 and 83. They were involved via a random selection process from rural Durham and Cumbria in northern England. Drawing on the methodology of the citizens' jury, the panel met four times over six months. They shared personal experiences of life in rural areas and discussed issues with key decision makers and information providers. At the end, the panel generated a set of recommendations on rural issues, which are currently being taken forward in a three year ongoing project.

The process in the Irish border region involved two distinct phases. Randomly recruited participants worked with a team of external facilitators to increase their confidence and to ensure that they were in a position to interact with policy makers efficiently and with confidence. Rather than being asked to respond to precise topics, participants were asked to



Members of the English Rural Community X-change undertake a mapping exercise.

Photo: Swingbridge Video

**Members of the
Cross-border
Irish Citizens'
Panel.**



Photo: Niall Fitzduff

come up with the topics on which they felt they needed to be consulted. The second phase of this process involved inviting policy makers to meet with the now confident and energised participants, giving them the chance to hear what the participants had to say.

The purpose of this format was to allow the participants to lead the consultation process, rather than them being asked to respond to topics or issues. The process itself raised some interesting points, not least that despite some of the issues being actively out for consultation at the time, policy makers were generally reluctant to engage in the process. However, the policy makers who did take part did so in an open and transparent manner. They were very positive in relation to taking on board the comments and feelings of the participants. They are to be commended for their bravery, their open-mindedness and their contribution to this process.

The English experience of Brussels

Seven young people and three adults from the English panel took part in a three-day event in Brussels, together with a further 76 citizens from across Europe. Each citizen participated in a series of workshops focused on concerns, themes and visions, until finally the panel agreed a set of European-wide recommendations. At the gathering's culmination, the citizens presented their recommendations in the form of a report to a number of high-profile European politicians and civil servants in the European Parliament buildings.

The interaction with European decision makers took place

in an auditorium with fixed seating. Upon speaking into an illuminated microphone, each speaker was simultaneously translated into seven different languages and his or her image relayed onto television screens on each person's desk. Recommendations were read out, and copies of the report were presented to key decision makers, followed by an open question-and-answer session. The reaction of the citizens to the meeting was mixed, with one group poised to walk out if the European Commissioner for Agriculture and Rural Development, Mariann Fischer Boel, refused to discuss the report. Others seemed relatively happy with the bland commitment from some decision makers to use the report for 'the design and the vision of future regional policy'.

The Irish experience of Brussels

The intense experience of spending four days together with participants interacting in different languages, meeting highly placed officials in the EU institutions and producing their own report was an amazing achievement. At this level the experience was fulfilling. However, for the most part the policy makers defended their policies, missing the opportunity to engage in a new type of dialogue. There was a sense of taking the status quo to task.

How real is all this in terms of participation and change? An optimistic view would be that citizens' panels can influence regional change, given that perhaps 5% of policy is up for negotiation. At EU level, it may be 1% that can be influenced. Then pitch that against 87 'citizens' and their legiti-

“Handled well, the feelings of empowerment experienced by those who take part in terms of speaking to those in power is palpable and tangible.”

People from nine regions of Europe present their case to the European Commissioner for Agriculture and Rural Development, Mariann Fischer Boel, who refused to discuss their report.



Young participant in Brussels reports on his group's discussions.



Photos: Peter Bryant

macy in representative terms against the population of Europe. As an educational exercise, the process has merit but it is costly. Handled well, the feelings of empowerment experienced by those who take part – in terms of speaking to those in power – is palpable and tangible. Citizens could be visibly seen to have been empowered and to grow in confidence throughout the process. But it is another matter as to whether it can achieve real change and add value to flagging democracies. Could such processes have the potential to be more than just a new toy for academics, policy makers and other professional elites? As with other articles in this issue, it is too early to say.

Final reflections, by Peter Bryant

So what can we learn from this unsatisfactory interaction and how could we have changed our practices? Our responses could probably be at two levels. Firstly, it would be possible to improve the process by making minor adaptations to the methodology. In advance of such a meeting, an attempt could be made to meet each of the decision makers to explain the process and its outcomes and push for them to commit to follow up (for example, by offering to pay for a meeting with ten citizens from the panel to discuss the deliberations in more depth). Time could be spent with citizens preparing them for the interaction and improving their political capabilities (for instance, by undertaking power analyses, gaining a better understanding of European decision-making processes, role playing the future interaction and rehearsing strategies for pushing for action). Interaction with decision makers could be in a more informal setting, taking into account the need for translators. Assertive facilitation of such a meeting could discourage politicians from offering only platitudes and no commitment to action.

The second option recognises the limitations of tinkering with the process and instead calls for a rethink of the role of approaches such as citizens' panels or juries as tools for

activism. This approach challenges the idea that through random sampling a selection of citizens can be 'representative' of a wider set of communities. Instead, what is most important is that citizens are selected who are more able to take action and push for the implementation of the recommendations, upon the conclusion of the deliberative phase of such a project. This could be achieved by linking the process directly with a relevant social movement or movements.

Such an approach could look something like this. The citizens for the English panel are selected from the membership of the Trades Union Congress (TUC). The selection may be random to a point, but with a bias towards marginalised members of the population who have little voice. Having undertaken a process of deliberation, which has also increased their political capabilities, the panel members are then supported by the TUC as they lobby decision makers, or use whatever strategy they see fit to try and affect change.

However, not everyone agrees that citizens' juries should be reshaped as tools for activism:

For me random selection is the most democratic way to select citizens. However, it is a biased method because those randomly selected persons accept to take part in the process by being 'politically' active. Two approaches should probably be combined: random selection combined with targeted people coming from under-represented groups.

Betty Nguyen, a French project facilitator.

It was always Peter Diemel's [credited as one of the original designers of a Citizens' Jury process] point of view that the participants get their legitimacy from being an 'ordinary' citizen selected at random for some time and a certain purpose/topic (which is defined by the institution who is the commissioning body and has its own democratic and legal legitimacy). 'Taking action' is not within

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their legitimacy. Of course, it is their natural right to take action. But then they act as only themselves, with nobody's mandate. For me, it is important and gives the recommendations weight that the citizens are selected at random from the whole population. If we choose them from trade union members or special groups of society we inject our bias and political objectives into the process.

Hilmar Sturm, facilitator.

The adoption of a strategy, which links so closely with a social movement, is a call for the repoliticisation of 'participatory' and deliberative processes such as citizens' juries, away from a technocratic instrumentalist approach, which

sees them as little more than sophisticated extractive market research tools.

After listening to a presentation on the European project, a friend of mine from Bolivia commented on the political naivety of such processes when held in Europe – and he may be right. In Mali l'ECID – a citizens' jury (see Article 3, this issue) of small farmers and producers examining the issue of GM cotton – has had a tremendous impact. Organised directly through a regional assembly and in conjunction with local farmers' movements, it has led directly to the decision to delay the trialling of genetically modified (GM) crops. The government there has the memory of farmers' direct action fresh in their minds and cannot risk the alienation of such a powerful, organised movement. In Europe, a depoliticised, glorified focus group will never have such an impact. However, the English panel may be moving in a positive direction. They continue to meet some eight months after the Brussels meeting. On hearing the news that the European Parliament's Committee on Agriculture and Rural Development has declined their request for a public hearing in favour of meeting with 'technical experts', they have decided to return to the European Parliament building in Brussels in 2008.

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