THE CHALLENGES OF PUBLIC DELIBERATION

AT A TRANSNATIONAL LEVEL

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Introduction

"Meeting of Minds: the European Citizens' Deliberation on Brain Science" was a pilot project launched by a partner consortium of technology assessment bodies, science museums, academic institutions and public foundations from nine European countries, with the support of the European Commission.

The initiative gave a panel of 126 European citizens a unique opportunity to learn more about the impact of brain research on their daily lives and society as a whole, to discuss their questions and ideas with leading European researchers, experts and policy-makers, and make a personal contribution to a report detailing what the panel members believe to be possible and desirable in the area of brain science and what they recommend policy-makers and researchers to be aware of for future developments in this field.

The specific objectives of the initiative are as follows, in relation to content, policy-making and method development.

Content

- To identify differences as well as commonalities between involved citizens from different European national and cultural contexts regarding their attitudes towards, and assessment and expectations of, social and ethical aspects of brain science.
- To invite the citizens involved to assess and consider scientific and technical possibilities vis-à-vis the social desirability of current and new development in brain science.

Policy/Governance

- To make recommendations to the science and research community at European, national and trans-national level on the commonalities and differences in public perceptions on social and ethical aspects of brain science.
- To set the issue of brain science on the policy and the wider political agenda.

Method development

- To set a standard for transnational public deliberations in other policy areas

The European Citizens' Deliberation method is mainly rooted in the European tradition of participatory technology assessment (pTA). pTA is being characterized in Europe by a great diversity of methods and activities (for a summary of this, see: Joss and Bellucci,

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2002, Banthien et al., 2003). In some countries (for instance, Denmark, the Netherlands, and the UK) there already exists a tradition going back 10 to 20 years; other countries have barely any experience at all in involving a broad spectrum of actors in the assessment of technological and scientific developments. It stands to reason then that this unequal situation would be translated into different institutional situations in the various countries. In some countries, there exist full parliamentary institutions to develop participative TA. In other countries, the government undertakes only occasional initiatives in this area, or it is only academic institutions or civil society organizations that concern themselves with pTA. The nature of the institution determines to a significant degree the role of the pTA and the link with the political decision-making process (Cruz-Castro and Sanz-Menéndez, 2004).

This large diversity of national situations forms a major obstacle to the development of pTA initiatives at the European level. However, there exist a number of different reasons that make the development on the supra-national or European level of TA in general, and, of pTA in particular, a necessity.

- First of all, there is the complex interaction between scientific and technological development and globalization, whereby national boundaries are becoming less and less relevant, either for what concerns the evolution of the scientific research itself, (Mallard et al., 2006, Wagner and Leydesdorff, 2005), or for its impact on the society.
- Secondly, the European Commission makes available, via the consecutive framework programs, ever more significant financial resources to fund research and development. This then means that, as a consequence, the EU ever more notably makes its presence felt in the scientific policy in Europe.
- Finally, the public debate about scientific and technological development is ever increasingly being conducted on the supra-national level. The European Commission is party to this analysis and therefore launched in 2002 the Science and Society Action Plan. Action point 22 of this plan provides: "The Commission will organize, through workshops and networks, an exchange of information and best practice between Member States and the regions on the use of participatory procedures for national and regional policies. These exchanges may lead to additional measures for addressing pan-European issues involving science and technology. These could include interactions between participants in national events, as well as the possibility of organizing participatory procedures at the European level".

A new method, grounded in existing pTA-experiences

Klüver et al. (2004) write : "There is an increasing call for the methodology of TA to be implemented in a European transnational context in order to harvest the impacts and societal roles of TA", and further: "There seems to be a much more urgent need for actual projects at a European level". Bellucci et al. (2002) advocate the development of a pan-European pTA. They are proposing two possible routes: on the one hand, the development of adapted versions of existing methods (as the citizen conference or

consensus conference) to compose pan-European citizens panel and, on the other, the simultaneous implementation of national participative activities, the results of which may be compared or assimilated at the European level.

In keeping exactly to the precepts of these two routes, "Meeting of Minds: the European Citizens' Deliberation on Brain Research" was created. In the following overview of the methodological steps, it becomes clear that central to the ECD-methodology is a pan-European citizens panel, that initiates parallel national assessments of which the results are taken as an input for a transnational assessment, carried out by the European panel.

The ECD-methodology in a nutshell

Issue analysis

Once the issue of 'brain sciences' was chosen (see further), the first hurdle to overcome was a clarification and an in-depth exploration of the issue. The first step in the methodology therefore was a workshop where leading European experts explored the developments and societal aspects of brain sciences. The result was an inventory on these aspects (Raeymaekers et al., 2004), forming the basis for the citizens information brochure (Slob et al., 2005).

Recruitment of 9 x 14 citizens

Nine national panels of 14 citizens formed together the European panel. In each country an invitation was sent to a randomly selected sample of 4.000 citizens. The selection of the positive reactions was based on age, gender and educational level. To guarantee as much diversity as possible, the motivation of the selected citizens was used as a control variable.

First national citizens meeting

The first gathering – at national level – offered an opportunity for the panels to get to know each other (teambuilding), to learn about (the societal aspects of) brain sciences and to have a first, initial round of formulating questions and concerns. This first meeting was seen as a brainstorm, without any selection or prioritizing amongst the generated results.

First European Citizens Convention

The objective of the first meeting with the complete European panel was to define relevant themes and questions about brain sciences, which could serve as a common agenda for the parallel national assessments. The design was inspired by the 21st Century Town Hall Meeting® (Slocum, 2005, Lukensmayer et al., 2005)), although adaptations were made to serve the multilingual and multicultural context. The main discussions took place at small multilingual tables (3 to 4 languages, 12 to 14 persons per table) with consecutive interpretation. Decisions (prioritizing themes and questions) were made by voting with keypads. – The most important deviation from the Town Hall Meeting was that in the ECD method questions and themes for the citizens to work with are framed by citizens through dialogue, whilst in the THM these questions and themes are chosen in advance by the organisers.

Parallel National Assessments

Based on the common agenda, each national panel worked during two weekends on an own national report with conclusions and recommendations on societal aspects of brain sciences. The design of these national assessments processes was based on the consensus conference model (Slocum, 2005). Deliberation and decisions were mainly based on consensus driven dialogue, although minority views were possible. In most countries this assessment was a public event. The final national assessment report was handed over to national decision makers.

Second European Citizens Convention

The second European Citizens Convention aimed at an integrated European Citizens Assessment, resulting in a final report with recommendation for European policy makers and stakeholders. For this purpose, the partners in the consortium designed a whole new method, puzzling elements of different existing methods like Carrousel and World Café (Brown and Isaacs, 2005) together. The deliberation process was dialogue driven but at decisive moments in the process selection and prioritizing was done through voting.

Policy advice and dissemination process

At national and European level much attention is paid to disseminating the results of the citizens work. This is done through stakeholders workshops, discussions in different parliaments, contributions to conferences, articles etc.

Knowledge management

Every piece of knowledge produced in the course of this project, on content and on methodology, is put on paper or at websites. Various reports, including a method manual, and articles will be produced.

Internal as well as an external, independent evaluation

The whole project was subject not only of an internal evaluation but also of an independent, external evaluation. The results of both these evaluations will be published.

Dealing with complexity: 5 challenges

It's no surprise that the complex process described above created problems. For some of these problems, it was impossible to find definite, satisfactory solutions. The five most important challenges are listed below and discussed in the following:

- An emerging and broad issue
- A multilingual and multi-cultural context
- Decision making procedures: dialogue vs. voting
- From national to European result
- Project management

The choice of the issue

Brain sciences are rapidly gaining societal importance. Nevertheless, the social consequences of brain sciences - in contrast to, for instance, in the area of genetics – have only to a minor degree been made the subject of serious reflection by researchers and ethicists (and then primarily in the US). General public – or political - debate on the subject has well-nigh been totally non-existent. These observations made the partners of the Meeting of Minds consortium decide to select "brain science" as the topic of their pilot project concerning participative technology assessment.

The fact that brain science is an "emerging issue" in the public debate means that an immediate impact on the political decision-making process was not the first and foremost consideration of initiative takers. Meeting of Minds primarily intended to place brain science on the political agenda in order to stimulate public debate, and to induce self-reflection amongst the stakeholders (for a typology of possible impacts of TA, see: Hennen et al., 2004).

The selection of an "emerging issue" was likewise based on a practical reason: there was no overlapping with existing TA initiatives, while the absence of public forum debate meant that the starting position in the various countries would be equal.

Nonetheless, the selection of an emerging theme also has a number of unmistakable disadvantages: it should prove more difficult to stir the interest of policy makers and the media; there are only a limited number of stakeholder groups active around the theme, and it is more difficult to formulate concrete policy options.

The general question asked to the participants was: "How should we deal with the newly acquired knowledge about the brain?". The broad framing of the theme (brain science is a collective name for a number of divergent scientific disciplines) appears justified in the case of an emerging issue. The scope of this question left it to the participants themselves to determine their topics for priority discussion. The fact that the panel members framed the issues to a large degree themselves, certainly strengthened their sense of ownership of the results. Moreover it provided strong learning opportunities for the panel members and the experts and it allows an interesting meta-analysis of the results. Yet it is furthermore undoubtedly a factor that has strongly added to the complexity of the deliberation process.

Dialogue in a multilingual and multicultural context

Dialogue is often seen as a basic principle in citizens participation to support the empowerment of citizens - and their ownership both to results and to the process of participation. Dialogue is an opportunity for citizens to formulate own ideas, proposals and assessments – to frame issues and questions – to listen to each other. Dialogue is therefore important to make sure that it is the genuine voices of the citizens we hear, when we get the results from different stages of deliberation.

It can be difficult to obtain tangible results from dialogue, even when participants speak the same language and come from the same culture. This is not only due to language or culture as such, but also due to the communicative "filtering" which is inherent to deliberative processes: from thought – to expression/communication – to dialogue – to formulation of questions or proposals (which not only your dialogue partner but also policy makers or scientists can understand) – to decision making. Normally one tries to overcome the obstacles to dialogue with good facilitation and clear rules for interaction.

With a cross European panel with 126 citizens speaking 8 different languages we had an extra filter of communication on top of all the normal filters. The solutions we tested were different at the first and the second European Convention, but in both cases they implied the engagement of about 50 interpreters using both simultaneous and consecutive interpretation.

At the first European Convention the citizens were seated at tables with 8-10 persons speaking 3-4 languages. They were accompanied by 1-2 interpreters, a facilitator and a rapporteur, whose job it was to write the results of the group's deliberations and send them to a central writing group, who should edit the outputs from all tables into a common set of themes for further discussion and prioritization.

At the second European Convention we tried another design for dialogue, which was babtizedthe Carroussel method. The European panel now was divided into 3 groups ("Carroussels") and each of these consisted of 8 single language tables and one center table for cross-national deliberation. Part of the Carroussel method was also a "European Café" (based on the World Café, see Slocum, 2005), which made it possible for the panel members to learn about and discuss the outputs from the other Carroussels.

Both these methods for multilingual dialogue have their strengths and weaknesses. Some citizens expressed that there was more interaction across language groups during the first convention. Others felt that the Carroussel method was a more efficient framework to produce the requested conclusions and recommendations.

The Meeting of Minds experience creates a solid background for more pilots and testing. In future efforts we recommend to deal very consciously with the challenge of lingual and cultural differences and to see them as resources and not only as obstacles to dialogue. The most important lessons we learned are:

- Multilingual dialogue takes a lot of time and requires particular interpretation and facilitation skills.
- Citizens learn to handle the multilingual context and develop some genuine dialogue.
- Interpretation related problems are inevitable and in a multilingual setting one deals with extra filters to understanding what the others say and formulating what you mean yourself.
- Different cultures of public debate are difficult to integrate into "one ideal deliberative practice" (Szapiro, 2004)
- The use of one working language (English) creates "unfair" situations for citzens who speak a different language.

Decision procedures: dialogue versus voting

Transparency and fairness are crucial principles of participatory processes (Bütchi et al, 2004). Normally, the translation of these principles in a design starts more from an outside perspective. But the multilingual and multicultural context, combined with the number of participants forced us to take in account the participants perspective as well. Otherwise we would endanger the citizens feeling of ownership of the result and the process.

In the work of the national panels, where everybody speaks the same language, we could thrust on dialogue and deliberation processes to take decisions. On the transnational panel, voting was seen as an important mean to solve the language (and thus transparency) problems and to avoid/reduce the complexity of finding consensus through dialogue. A more efficient decision making process should have been the result.

So, at the two European Citizens Convention, voting was used to prioritize themes and issues, to select among recommendations and to monitor confidence. But at both conventions, we had (small) confidence crises related to voting situations. We came through these crises without the citizens loosing thrust in the process but they were an indication that we weren't successful in being as transparent as possible.

Firstly, voting doesn't solve language problems. Also with voting, options need to be properly translated and presented. We relied too much on citizens capability to deal with short English messages and texts. Secondly, in our attempt to make the voting procedures each time as fair as possible, we created real complex voting procedures, juggling with simple majorities, two thirds majorities, allowing multiple votes etc. Voting rules need to be as simple as possible, which can conflict with principles as fairness. Thirdly, it became clear that voting reduced the diversity and richness of the deliberation. Minority views were too often the victim of the different voting rounds. By excluding them early in the process, the fairness of the process is affected. One important observation in this respect is that many participants developed 'voting tactics', aiming at selecting their own choices and options by neglecting other proposals and ideas.

So voting doesn't necessarily increase the legitimacy of the decision making process, on the contrary, it can be a threat for it. Therefore, it should be dealt with as careful as possible.

From national to European results

The task of the panel, both at European and at nationallevel, was -as earlier mentioned- to formulate an answer to the main question: "How are we going to use our new found knowledge on the brain?" This task was split into several subtasks and there was a division of the work between the national and the European level as listed below:

1. at European level: to frame the issue of brain science by formulating and agreeing on some common themes to work with at national level
2. to formulate and agree on themes (European level) and questions (national level) to ask experts and other stakeholders at public conferences and
3. to write a final national report with the panel's conclusions and recommendations for national politicians and other decision makers.
4. to write a final European report with the panels conclusions and recommendation to European decision makers

The ECD method was designed in order to promote the integration of the relatively independent national assessments and the European assessment process. But is such a double track strategy necessary and fruitful?

The national assessments proved to be a sound background for the work at European level: national assessments with citizens' panels communicating in their own language created confidence for the whole process for the citizens.
But there were also practical reasons, such as the fact that partners, scientists, stakeholders in the field are mainly organised at national level. And media and public sphere are also (so far) mainly existing at national level. Furthermore the two tracks allow that we can use national differences (policy agenda, contexts, opinion) as part of the project.

The rationale for the European project is the starting point for the whole project: the emerging European public sphere and the increasing policy relevance of the EU in the area of research and the need of citizens participation at EU level. Here it should be stated that the European assessment represents an additional level of deliberation which has its own value, and cannot be reduced to a simple addition of the national results.The transnational dialogue gave citizens an intuitive sense of issues that need to be dealt with at European level instead of at national level.

We were not good enough to use the results from each step as input into the next step (e.g. to analyse differences and commonalities in the national results and track their background and really use them as input to help structure the deliberations at European level).

The main lesson is that the double track should be integrated into one track and seen as one track towards common deliberation results. This would demand a time table with more time to digest and work with results from one step to another, which would allow organisers to design more carefully the connections between national and European level.

The basic assumption here is that only by accepting and understanding the national differences (and their background, context, culture, language style etc) one can achieve truly European results and citizens can understand what it means to be aEuropean citizen.

Project management

A steering committee composed of representatives of the 12 organizing institutions and chaired by the King Baudouin Foundation (Belgium) took charge of the project coordination. The group met 10 times between 2002 and 2006. Nearly all decisions connected to the method development and the practical implementation were taken jointly by the committee. The decisions of the steering committee were sometimes prepared by specific task forces (for method development, communication, and facilitating). The result is a bottom-up method development that leaves room for a different approach in the respective participating countries, yet at the same time guarantees adequate uniformity.

Aside from the steering committee, a separate working group was set up composed of the national facilitators and the European lead facilitators that made detailed preparations during the national and European meetings.

This form of decision-making is undoubtedly complex, laborious, and expensive. Nonetheless, this working method offers a host of advantages, with the proviso always that each and every party's responsibilities are clearly described and that clear leadership is present.

- The diversity amongst the partners (research centres, TA institutes, foundations and science centers) guaranteed the accumulation of a wide range of varied aspects of expertise and experiences.
- The fact that the partners had gathered from 9 countries made it possible to take into account politically and culturally different contexts.
- The partners' strong involvement in the methodology development resulted in their strong involvement in the project's European dimension.
- The project has contributed to the capacity building of all participating partners and the cooperative partnership can no doubt be re-activated in the future.

Conclusion: we have to face the challenges again!

'Meeting of Minds. European Citizens' Deliberation on Brain Science' proves that a genuine, trans-national and multilingual deliberation of a complex issue, carried out by a large group of ordinary citizens, is possible and even necessary.. Many of the recommendations of the European panel (not discussed in this paper) show that citizens can come up with important – and maybe otherwise neglected – aspects and issues of brain science. The reactions of experts, stakeholders and policy-makers we received underline this added value.

'Meeting of Minds' was a first real attempt to organize trans-national participatory Technology Assessment. It was a thrilling and inspiring experience which most participants (citizens, experts and organizers) would like to do again. And if we believe that transnational pTA is necessary, we need more pilot projects to gain more experience

and knowledge. But we can only make progress if next time the following learnt lessons are taking into account:

- Consider carefully the **framing of the issue**. If you start with a broad issue (as brain science), there is a lot of room for citizens to define topics and questions. This strengthens their sense of ownership and it provides room for strong learning opportunities. But a broad issue is undoubtedly a factor that adds to the already very complex nature of the assessment process and that puts a heavy burden on the time budget of the process.
- Language – more than panel size – is the limiting factor. But citizens really are open for **multilingual dialogue**. In future efforts, we recommend to deal very consciously with the challenge of lingual and cultural differences. But these differences are not only an obstacles but, if handled correctly, can be a resource for a rich dialogue.
- **Voting** must be dealt with as careful as possible. It can make processes more efficient and less time-consuming but voting doesn't increase the legitimacy of the decision making process. On the contrary, it can be a threat for it. Rules and purposes of voting need to be very clear, logic and transparent.
- Only by accepting and understanding the **national differences** (and their background, context, culture, language style etc) one can achieve truly European results and citizens can understand what it means to be aEuropean citizen.
- A **Steering Committee from 12 partners** creates both strong advantages (involvement, capacity building) and disadvantages (complex, labourious, expensive).It is important also here to have room and time to appreciate and use the diversity to create new knowledge.

List of partners of the 'Meeting of Minds'-consortium

- King Baudouin Foundation (BE)
- University of Westminster (UK)
- Flemish Institute for Science & Technology Assessment (BE)
- Université de Liège (BE)
- Danish Board of Technology (DK)
- Cité des Sciences et de l'Industrie (FR)
- Deutches Hygiene-Museum (DE)
- Eugenides Foundation (EL)
- University of Debrecen (HU)
- Fondazione Idis - Città della Scienza (IT)
- Rathenau Institute (NL)
- Science Museum's Dana Centre (UK)

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