

Europe Wide Views (EWViews) on Sustainable Consumption:

A pan-European citizen consultation involving more than 1000 citizens described on the example of Austria

Introduction:

Nowadays societies are facing many strong interconnected challenges. These so called “Grand Challenges” (i.e. challenges of global warming, resources and energy, water and food and public health etc.) were stated in the Lund Declaration (2009) and are since then a major driver for R&D as well as for policies. National and European policy makers face challenges of making policies, which on the one hand address the before mentioned real world problems, while at the same time they underlie the pressure of economic turbulent times. Societal Consumption, as one of the causes for many of the problems stated in the Lund Declaration is therefore a highly sensitive topic for policymakers. It lies in two fields of tension. First, consumption is seen as the main driver for economic growth, although it has negative environmental effects. Second, consumption choices are viewed as a private matter for individuals. Policy makers and governments are generally hesitant to intervene too much in their citizens’ private space. As a result, policies aimed at enhancing sustainable consumption tend to be focused on the production of goods and services, rather than on private consumption.

On the 26th of October 2014, more than 1000 European citizens took part in the transnational event Europe Wide Views on Sustainable Consumption. The citizen consultation took place in 11 EU member states¹ at the same date and based on the same methodological framework. The citizens were invited to share their views on sustainable consumption and provide a broader knowledge base for decisions of European policymakers on the issue sustainable consumption. During the consultation the citizens discussed measures aimed at private citizens and the different roles that citizens could play in increasing sustainability in society.

Method:

The method, which was used in the consultation “Europe Wide Views on Sustainable Consumption”, is based on the World Wide Views (WWViews) method. The method has been developed by the Danish Board of Technology Foundation. So far, WWVs citizen consultations have been organized twice. In 2009, 38 countries took part in a project about global warming, and in 2012, citizens from 25 countries discussed and voted on issues relating to biodiversity. Further applications of the method are planned for the upcoming years².

The method combines simultaneous national face-to-face citizen consultations with a web-based transnational comparison of national results. The core of the method is to have citizens at multiple national sites debate the same policy related questions, and thus making transnational, quantitative comparisons possible. The participating citizens are lay people, which are recruited in a way so that they collectively reflect the demographic diversity of their country. The method strengthens the engagement of citizens in political decision-making processes as citizens have to live with the consequences of policies. For that reason, their views should be taken into consideration.

EWViews on sustainable consumption:

¹ Austria, Belgium, Bulgaria, Denmark, Czechia, Hungaria, Ireland, Lithuania, Netherland, Portugal and Spain (Catalonia)

² <http://www.wwviews.org/>

In each of the participating 11 European countries the EWViews citizen consultations followed the exact same format: In a first step at least 100 near representative citizens were recruited in each of the eleven participating countries. The recruitment was based on demographic parameters like gender and age but also on their occupation and their residence (urban, rural) and educational level. After the recruitment of the citizens, the citizens received in beginning of October an information booklet on sustainable consumption covering the following four topics:

- Introduction to Sustainable Consumption
- Shifting to More Sustainable Consumption
- Reducing Consumption
- Reducing Waste

The information material was written in an easy understandable language so that the citizens could inform themselves on the topic and had enough time to reflect on the information material. Additionally, four short information videos were produced for the 26th of October. The videos and the information material were translated in the national languages. On the day of the consultation a head facilitator and group moderators (7 citizens per table) lead the participants through a programme divided into the four abovementioned thematic sessions. Each thematic session was introduced by the head facilitator and an information video. After this introduction, the participants discuss in moderated groups. The purpose of this is that each citizen has time to reflect and listen to other opinions. Each thematic session ended with a voting session, where citizens individually vote on alternative answers to a number of questions, which correspond to the respective thematic session. The voting results are instantly reported on a web-based tool, so that anyone with Internet access can compare answers to the various questions across countries³.

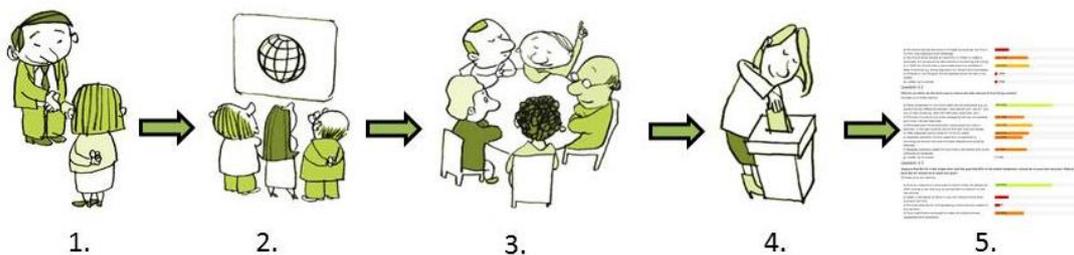


Figure 1: Process of the Citizen consultation: 1) Citizens meet each other at the day of the event. They received an information booklet three weeks before the consultation. 2) Each thematic session is introduced by a information video. 3) They discuss in moderated groups of up to 7 citizens their different views and perspectives on the respective topic. 4) Immediately after each thematic session an individual voting on several questions takes place. The results are reported to a web-tool, where they can be compared with all other countries.

Some preliminary highlights of the results and the communication with relevant addressees:

In general the citizens, who participated in the consultation, shared the opinion, that the European Union should set ambitious strategies and policy goals concerning waste, the establishment of a circular economy, conflict materials and transitions in energy supply and use. Also they shared the common view, that the transition to sustainable consumption cannot be left alone to market mechanisms. Citizens are well aware of their dual role as consumers (“economic power”) and citizens (“political power”) and they are willing to reduce their consumption voluntarily. Nevertheless they cannot stem this challenge by themselves. Citizens need support from the political actors. Fields of action for the political actors are for instance the transportation system, labelling of products or the durability of products (“Design for the dump”). In these cases, actions and policies are needed in order to support the citizens.

In order to get citizens’ views and opinions heard, the EWViews consultation doesn’t end with the citizen consultation itself. The voting results will be disseminated to national as well as European policymakers and stakeholders. Therefore a transnational policy report will be written and presented to members of the European parliament during a policy workshop in Brussels in beginning of 2015 (work in progress).

³ The results of the consultation can be found here: <http://citizenconsultation.pacitaproject.eu/results/>

The PACITA Project:

The pan-European citizen consultation took place as a case study in the Project PACITA. PACITA (Parliaments and Civil Society in Technology Assessment) is a four-year EU-financed Action Plan under the Science-in-society activities of FP7, which aims to increase the capacity of and to enhance the institutional foundation or knowledge-based policy making on issues involving science, technology and innovation. It is based on the diversity of practices in Parliamentary Technology Assessment (PTA) cross Europe and is designed for mutual learning between policy makers, scientists and TA representatives. The ultimate aim of PACITA is to contribute to the institutionalisation of support platforms for knowledge-based decision making in all European countries.

References and links:

Information on the Consultation: <http://citizenconsultation.pacitaproject.eu/>

Information on the method: <http://www.wvviews.org/>

Information on the project: <http://www.pacitaproject.eu/>

The Lund declaration (2009): <http://www.vr.se/download/18.7dac901212646d84fd38000336/>