



Berlin-Budapest Cross-Border Public Participation Process

Planning Cell Methodology within the European Citizens' Consultation Project

Subject

The use of cross-border participatory methods is still in the fledgling stages. Yet, in a European Union whose policies have an increasing impact on the daily lives of its citizens, it is only reasonable to watch out for participatory initiatives, which do not stop at the geographical borders of a country. The European Citizens' Consultations (ECC) are a pilot project in the field of cross-border participatory projects involving citizens from all 27 Member States of the EU. The European Citizens' Consultations are the first-ever pan-European debate among citizens from the 27 Member States discussing the future of the European Union across the boundaries of geography and language. Citizens exchange opinions, develop together their ideas on the future direction of Europe, and communicate their perspectives to policy-makers. Simultaneous and interlinked events across Europe allow every citizen to make his or her voice heard. The consultations and their follow-up aim at inspiring European as well as national institutions and decision-makers as they prepare to take decisions on the next phase of Europe's development. Four planning cells [1] were carried out – two in Berlin (Germany), two in Budapest (Hungary) – also as cross-border initiatives within this pan-European project.

Rationale

The planning cells are the second stage of the European Citizens' Consultation (ECC). After 200 citizens determined the three topics to be discussed throughout the stages to follow (namely, Energy & Environment, Family & Social Welfare, EU's Global Role & Immigration) at the Agenda Setting Event in October 2006, the main purpose of the planning cells – two in Berlin (Germany), two in Budapest (Hungary) – was to deepen these topics in order to prepare information for the national consultations taking place in February and March 2007.

Objectives

The ECC project lays out the challenges of such cross-border initiatives and shows a way to tackle them. The success of the ECC launch event, the planning cells, the national consultations and the final consultation shows that this project has the potential to serve as role model for future cross-border initiatives.

Characteristics of the Method

Planning cells and citizens' reports are tools for the participation of citizens on planning and decision-making processes. They were developed as interrelated method in the early 1970's. A planning cell is a group of citizens, who work on the solution of given problems and are accompanied by assistants. Five features are characteristic for the planning cell:

- 20 – 25 randomly chosen persons work as citizens consultants for three to four days on a concrete problem.
- They get freed of their everyday duties and earn a compensation for that time.
- Experts and involved interest groups provide them with controversial information.
- A constant change in the composition of the working groups guarantees a fair precondition for discussions.
- The recommendations are processed in a citizens' report.

The preparation of the planning cell, the compilation of the program, the selection of the experts and the processing of the results is organised by a neutral and independent organisation. The whole process must be structured and prepared in detail, to assure an unobstructed and successful accomplishment.

Application and Challenges

Main Steps of the Planning Cell Process

The planning cells were organised in Berlin (21-24 November 2006) and in Budapest (1-3 December 2006). They lasted for four days in Berlin, while for three days in Budapest. The important working units were the same in all planning cells. In Berlin 45 citizens and in Budapest 40 citizens discussed the three main issues. Every day was divided in four working units lasting 90 minutes. Between each working unit we had a 30 minute break. Lunch was served between the second and the third working unit. Each working unit was divided in two parts. In the first and shorter part an expert provided basic information on the topic discussed in the particular unit. This took approximately 20-25 minutes. Afterwards the participants had 10 minutes for possible questions. Thereafter the expert left the planning cell and the participants split into groups consisting of five people, which discussed the topic at hand on the basis of a concrete question, which was handed out to them in the beginning of the working group stage. They had 30-40 minutes time to discuss the topic and to agree upon three important aspects, answering the given question and to write them down on already prepared cards. When the time for deliberations was over, all participants once again gathered in the plenum to present the results of each working group. If possible, similar or close results were combined in a cluster. In the end of each working unit every participant received six adhesive dots to vote for the most important aspects from his or her point of view. The participants were not allowed to put more than two dots on each card or cluster.



Organising the planning cells had to face the challenges of cross-border projects, among others rooted in the comparability of results, problems arising from the translation of the topics and the ensuring of an identical setting of the method in different countries. The different results gave an insight in the specific problems of the country at hand. Differences were rooted in the specific circumstances of the countries. The comparison of the planning cells shows that in many cases identical propositions were made. This is all the more interesting, as this statement applies especially to the top three propositions in each country.

The Advantage of Planning Cells in a Border Crossing Process / in the Context of ECC

Planning cells are designed in a way to accommodate people with very different social backgrounds as well as educational and knowledge levels. This feature, originally intended to harmonise interaction of heterogeneous groups, is particularly useful in the context of cross-border projects. When more than one group is involved in the same participative process, the program has to be clearly structured to ensure the comparability of the results. The planning cell method with its clearly defined working units and detailed working tasks offers a structure that can be implemented not only in different settings but also in different countries. Within the ECC project, the planning cell method was of great use, as it made intensive deliberations on the topics at hand possible thereby giving a deeper insight into the aspects of each one of them.



Some tips

Challenges that go along with cross-border projects:

- Comparability of results:
 - 'context sensitive' expertise and expert-citizens interaction could be perceived as 'different' input
 - cultural background: different interpretation of identical questions
 - Problems arising from the translation of the topics / results
 - Ensuring an identical setting of the method in different countries
- Different results give an insight in the specific problems of the country at hand!

References

Planning Cell Methodology:

ViTWA/The King Baudouin Foundation, (2005). Participatory methods Toolkit: A practitioners' manual. www.kbs-frb.be

European Citizens' Consultation Project:

<http://www.european-citizens-consultations.eu>

Application of Planning Cell Methodology within European Citizens' Consultation Project:

http://www.european-citizens-consultations.eu/fileadmin/user_upload/ECC_Citizen_Juries_Short_Report.pdf

[1] Planning cell methodology has been accomplished in the ECC process, although the term 'citizens jury' has been used as it is better known.