Participation "Big Style": First Experiences with the German Citizens' Dialogue on Energy Technologies for the Future.

SURNAME: Hahn
NAME: Julia
MAIL: julia.hahn@kit.edu
ORGANISATION: Karlsruhe Institute of Technology, Institute for Technology Assessment and Systems Analysis (ITAS)

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The project "Bürgerdialoge" ("citizens' dialogues") initiated by the German Federal Ministry of Education and Research aims to incorporate the perspectives of citizens regarding future technologies. Germany's highly discussed withdrawal from nuclear energy and the accompanied fundamental changes in energy production were subjects of eight regional dialogues (with about 100 participants each) which took place from July to November of 2011. Citizens were invited to discuss and develop approaches to solve pressing energy questions such as energy efficiency, renewable energy, energy grids and bridging technologies. In a first discussion-round the citizens' concerns and expectations were documented and a second round was made up of developing approaches and possible polices for dealing with and solving the issues articulated. The goal of each regional dialogue was to put together a report which was given to a representative of the ministry. During a two daylong summit concluding the regional dialogues, participants wrote a final summarizing report, which was officially passed on to the federal minister. The entire process was accompanied by an advisory board made up of representatives of research, science, the economy, civil society as well as participating citizens themselves. Additionally, an Internet platform offered the possibility of online participation.
A first interpretative analysis of the dialogues shows several overarching topics. The decentralization of energy production was a central aspect of all dialogues and was seen as a possibility to strengthen regional participation of citizens and municipalities helping them become more independent from large energy companies and to develop local energy plans.
Further, participants stated that the political framework in form of taxes, research funds and new laws was an important tool to encourage energy efficiency, the development of new technologies and education of the public. Overall, offering advice and guidance to citizens was seen as a main job of the government. Examples were: new subjects in schools dealing with energy and sustainability, the creation of an Internet platform offering independent information, shows on TV, and further open-ended dialogues with citizens. The necessity of large investments in research for the improvement and development of technologies and economic aspects regarding the importance of supporting the enlargement of highly qualified people were also discussed.
Generally, this format, compared to other participation approaches (such as focus groups), gave a relatively large number of citizens the opportunity to take on an active role in the discussion, but also the framing of possible policy decisions. Further, the dialogues have a qualitative level; going beyond, for example referendums, and enabling decision makers to understand citizens' narratives regarding new technologies. By providing insights into normative frameworks, values and interests of citizens (understood as 'experts for the everyday`) formats like the citizens' dialogues can support a certain 'sensitivity' of decision

makers regarding issues important to the public and can enable the integration of these into wider policy-making. An added value can be won by offering a format in which citizens can give their 'expert' contextual knowledge of how for example new technologies would affect their everyday lives as well as wider social aspects.

Yet this can be met by some pitfalls, which, regarding the citizens' dialogues and often other participation processes, are frequently grounded in different mutual understandings of the actors. Several observations by the research team during the dialogue events point to this. For the participating citizens it was very important to be taken seriously, which resulted in strong claims for the reliable inclusion of their recommendations or at least their regard from the political side. These expectations couldn't be fully met by the process itself as the citizens' recommendations were only intended to be acknowledged by officially passing them on to the minister. No other 'hard criteria' for their implementation were agreed upon. From the political side, the actual integration of the dialogue outcome remains difficult and synchronization with political processes is missing. Of course it is hard to find clear evidence of this integration since the citizens' recommendations will not be turned into laws directly, this was also not promised from the ministry. Still the impact of the results remains low as well as indicators for their further regard in political or scientific spheres are scarce. Also the experts from the economic, civil or scientific field often regarded the citizens as 'not expert enough' to give legitimate statements. This could be observed before and during the dialogue events when the experts tried to influence the preparation of the input papers and then the discussions and outcomes of the participants. These 'misunderstandings' of the involved actors' roles is grounded in different expectations towards their involvement in the process and a missing communication of the aims and goals but also limits of the dialogues.

These contextual and procedural findings can be related to a wider theoretical framework allowing for a critical review of the dialogues themselves and potentially offering the development of (normative) criteria important for participation processes. An increasing number of projects with participatory elements in recent years make such a wider reflection important, while still regarding the individual and specific aspects of each participation process.

A possible framework for critically reviewing citizens' dialogues: (normative) concepts of sustainability and responsible innovation

Public engagement goes beyond simply assessing citizens' perceptions, hopes and fears. It includes creating new forms of participation that in some way influence the development of policies and extend the knowledge basis. For participation concerned with technology assessment, such as the citizens' dialogues, this is grounded in the understanding that new technological developments are shaped socially, they don't just occur linearly in a separate sphere. An isolated view of technology and society "disregards the situated, practice-bound construction of technologies' meaning and their actual, concrete effects on the practice in which they are implemented [also] these effects often transcend the expected effects" (Kiran 2012: 217). This makes it important to extend the assessment of technology to "include elements of speculative foresight through public involvement" (Hellström 2003: 380). Conceptually, links between participatory processes and concepts of responsible innovation as well as sustainability can be helpful here in order to enable a framework for understanding and evaluating these processes.

Participation and collaboration are understood as an essential and integral conditions for sustainability in order to improve the knowledge and value base as well as the acceptance of sustainability-oriented decisions (cf. Newig, Kuhn, Heinrichs 2011: 28). Without presenting a thorough (historical) description of the concept of sustainability (see:

Robinson 2004) and within it the development and role of participatory processes (see: Newig, Kuhn, Heinrichs 2011) the following can function as a working definition and normative framework of sustainability:

"the concept speaks to the reconciliation of social justice, ecological integrity, and the well being of all living systems on the planet. The goal is to create an ecologically and socially just world within the means of nature without compromising future generations. Sustainability also refers to the process or strategy of moving towards a sustainable future" (Moore 2005: 78).

This also points to certain competencies needed, which "are expected to enable active, reflective and cooperative participation towards sustainable development" (Barth, Godemann, Rieckmann, Stoltenberg 2007: 418). Further, within the 'Integrative Sustainability Concept' (cf. Schultz, Brand, Kopfmüller, Ott 2008) participation is a key 'rule' to ensure development and options for future action. This highlights the importance of participation, which can offer the possibility to include new kinds of transdiciplinary knowledge for sustainability processes and a shift "from the reduction to the knowing few, to the dialogue of many about systemically networked knowledge" (Kirchberg 2009).

In a more 'technology assessment sense', the concept of responsible innovation can offer a further basis (within sustainability considerations) for framing participatory processes and emphasizing their importance. Hellström suggests several "arenas of governance" of responsible innovation, which can "assess the consequences across society of new technologies […] in terms of unplanned or unanticipated consequences" (Hellström 2003:381). Understanding risks as systemic and "threats which seem inevitable yet impossible to predict" (ibid: 380) make it necessary to think of "'pre-emptive' knowledge management, or knowledge improvement tools for integrating and utilizing tacit understandings" (ibid: 382). This in turn would

"help shed light on the consequences of new proposed technologies, resolve problems of risk assessment and management practice, provide new cognitive frameworks for complexity reduction and suggest new ways of managerially drawing the boundaries of emerging technological systems" (ibid.).

These two frameworks, which cannot be thought of separately, have a general connection point; they both regard participation as integral. Therefore, they can offer theoretical frameworks for further evaluating concrete processes which claim to be participatory, such as the citizens' dialogues. From a sustainability perspective, as briefly described above, certain criteria can be developed concerning participation processes; these can comprise: enabling reflexivity, generating, including and valuing new forms of transdiciplinary knowledge as well as opening up discourses. Regarding responsible innovation the criteria developed can be: enabling and widening contextual knowledge, 'translation' of new technological developments into specific social realities of people, legitimate inclusion of values as well as hopes and concerns of citizens (understood as 'experts for the everyday'), inclusion of stakeholders, transparency and clear defined goals, impact of results in political decision making processes.

With these criteria, which will have to be further developed, it becomes possible reflect on the findings of the research group regarding the citizens' dialogues. As a process the dialogues can be said to have opened up the discourse to a certain degree, attempting to enable the collaboration and exchange between political actors, experts and citizens and increasing reflexivity. Yet, as described above, this was not an easy task and was met by some difficulties regarding the mutual (mis)understandings of the involved actors as well as of their roles. Also the contextual input given by the ministry was clearly defined, while at the same time the exact role of the citizens' results, except for being passed on to the minister, was not communicated. During the events many participants asked how their results would influence decision makers or experts and, as it seemed by the vague

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answers given, this was not clearly planned beforehand. Regarding this the dialogues lacked reliability and clear defined goals and weren't able to combine input legitimacy (inclusion of values and interests) with output legitimacy (quality, robustness and impact of results).The high 'political profile' of the citizens' dialogues (i.e. budget and representatives from the ministry) corresponds with a general increasing demand for participation processes. Yet, as this reflection has attempted to show there are many aspects and specifics to be considered. The framework of sustainability and responsible innovation briefly introduced above can offer a starting point for the development of 'good practice' criteria enabling the assessment of these participation processes ranging from the transparent and serious inclusion of citizens' recommendations and concerns into the policy decision process to mere engagement exercises.

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