

Fostering Deliberative Democracy: *Europe's DeCiDe Project*

By Andrea Bandelli

Deliberative democracy — the practice by which lay citizens gather to discuss matters of local or national importance and decide together how best to proceed — is a venerable institution. (Think of the Athenian agora or town meetings in New England.) "Deliberation" presumes that no one individual has the best answer, but rather that the group will come to a mutually acceptable solution through a process of structured conversation. Historically, this approach has worked for a wide range of issues, from land-use planning to budget formulation.

As nations became larger and more complex, such participatory forums became less common. But in the past 20 years or so, deliberative democracy has enjoyed something of a revival. Governments facing public censure for controversial policies have increasingly sought ways to engage the public in discussion and debate particularly on science and technology issues, such as water use, climate change, or genetic research.

These occasions have been labeled with a variety of names — consensus conferences, deliberative opinion polls, citizens' juries, scenario workshops, stakeholders' dialogues, deliberative and inclusive processes. They vary by the number of people involved, the amount of information that participants receive, and the role of the final deliberation in the formal policy-making process. This last element is crucial because it has been shown that participants exhibit stronger social engagement when

they know that their decisions will be heard and taken into consideration.

To achieve that level of trust, the organizing bodies must create the right framework to make meaningful use of debates, ensure that the quality

with citizen participation in science and technology decision making.

Called "DeCiDe" (Deliberative Citizens' Debates in Science Centers and Museums), the project has three main goals:



In a test of a prototype DeCiDe kit on neurology and brain science, participants study the cards. •

of discussion is high, and establish the necessary links with the policy-making system. This can be thought of as the "vertical" effect of deliberative democracy — letting policy makers know what the people think.

There is also a "horizontal" effect, which includes not only the individual learning that occurs during a session, but also the general benefit to society when people understand the democratic system and feel that they are competent to participate in it.

A serious game

In the spirit of deliberative democracy, four ASTC members — At-Bristol, La Cité des Sciences et de l'Industrie, La Città della Scienza, and Heureka, the Finnish Science Centre — have joined with the Ecsite network to engage in a Europe-wide experiment

- to raise European citizens' awareness of deliberative methodologies
 - to develop an effective tool to conduct deliberative consultations
 - to monitor change of opinion on contemporary science issues.

A key partner in the project has been Nef, a British foundation active in the field of democracy, social inclusion, and participation. Nef had already developed a program of citizen participation called "Democs" (Deliberative Meetings of Citizens), and this became the model for DeCiDe.

Based on a game format, DeCiDe debates use a kit that can be downloaded from the Internet and printed in-house. The game is designed for six to eight participants with no prior knowledge of the topic. Components include placemats on which participants can write their comments; a Policy Position voting Grid for use by

the group, feedback forms, and several sets of cards, as follows: 24 green "info" cards, 4 red "policy position" cards, 24 blue "issue" cards, 8 "story" cards, 3 "cluster heading" cards, several blank white cards, and a blank yellow card for each player.

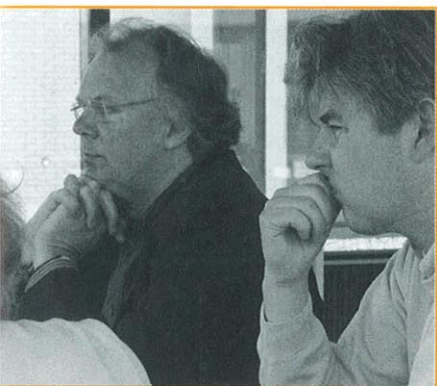
During the first phase of the debate, participants select info cards, which represent facts relating to the subject of the debate, and issue cards, which present arguments intended to sustain a particular view on that subject. These cards are often a catalyst to unlock personal experiences and

Vertical and horizontal outcomes

The first topics developed for DeCiDe include nanotechnology, stem cells, and HIV/AIDS. As this article goes to press (mid August), the plan is to choose 12 European science centers and museums that will hold six DeCiDe sessions each. The results of the debates will be posted on the project's web site for comparison and analysis. In collaboration with the European Commission, the outcomes will also be used

available on the Internet, and the only infrastructure needed is a table and some chairs. It is therefore an activity perfectly suitable for outreach.

The program is also potentially self-sustaining. In the trials conducted during the development phase of DeCiDe, a large majority of participants expressed a willingness to organize similar debates with their own family, friends, and colleagues. The web component of the project helps to collate the results, make them available to the general



listen to different viewpoints. .



. . . and map out their consensus on the policy position grid.



Photos by Erik Wong

knowledge that people already have. In this phase, participants clarify their personal views on the topic at hand.

In the second phase, participants start to "cluster" their cards around common themes that emerge from their discussion. Each participant contributes his or her part to the definition of the cluster, and the final result is the achievement of the whole group. The goal of this phase is to define the group's shared view on an issue, which will then be used to define and vote on the policy positions.

Finally, the group is asked to vote on four different policies for regulating the issue under discussion, deciding which one gets their consensus. (Participants can also formulate a new policy if they wish.) The clusters help them to put aside their personal interests and use their common view to inform their vote.

to inform the policy-making process at the European level — thus ensuring "vertical" spreading of the results.

It is difficult to assess in advance exactly how this process will take place. Among politicians, there is always a marked interest to get involved, but little concrete evidence of real plans to use the results. Different strategies will be used in DeCiDe, however — from the direct participation of policy makers in the DeCiDe session itself to the organization of debates as part of a framework of official events at the local and national level.

The real strength of the consortium developing the DeCiDe project may lie in its capacity to build the "horizontal" value of participative activities. The activity itself is one that anybody can organize with a minimum of effort. All materials are

public, and provide a stimulus for citizens to better understand how policy decisions are made.

An argument might be made that this activity engages only a limited audience in terms of numbers. This is true. But the quality of the results creates a social (and political) value superior to the sheer volume of participants. A challenge for our field is to create new organizational models that might allow us to capitalize on this value and, ultimately, to sustain it. ■

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Additional information on the DeCiDe project is available at www.playdecide.org.