

Local citizen engagement in climate protection

'Electronic' or 'e-participation', citizen involvement through new and interactive media, introduces various new possibilities. The effects of citizen engagement and e-participation in the field of climate protection and their actual impact have so far barely been explored. The ITA therefore jointly investigated the following hypotheses and questions with the Institute of Information Management Bremen and the Research Group in Public Management at the University of Saragossa:

- *Collective participation mobilises:* Does it lead to community building, social learning, empowerment, and pressure to change?
- *Information saves energy:* Does knowledge about the effects of one's own energy consumption together with the possibility of comparing oneself with others lead to changes in behaviour and CO₂ reduction?
- *There are measurable effects of participation:* Is the impact of participation measurable as a reduction of CO₂ emissions and in energy savings (CO₂ calculator)?

In brief

- Effective climate protection needs the support of citizens and companies.
- The research project e2democracy investigated the contribution of citizen panels to CO₂ reduction in seven European regions.
- The participation format led to pro-climate sensitisation, behavioural changes and measurable CO₂ reduction, but also showed some limits such as in reaching wider segments of society.

What is it about?

Mitigating climate change is one of the great present-day challenges. To prevent the severe damage that is threatening, we can no longer postpone a considerable reduction of greenhouse gas emissions. Implementing ambitious climate targets at national level needs more than joint action by politics and business. Everyone can and should contribute by making pro-climate changes in their everyday behaviour.

So far, the population has been mainly involved through awareness-raising and support programmes – individual energy consulting or subsidies for energy saving investments. A rather new development is for policy-makers and the administration to seek a direct dialogue with citizens in developing and implementing climate protection strategies.



UNESCO award for the e2democracy research project: local climate protection by (e-)participation in citizen panels

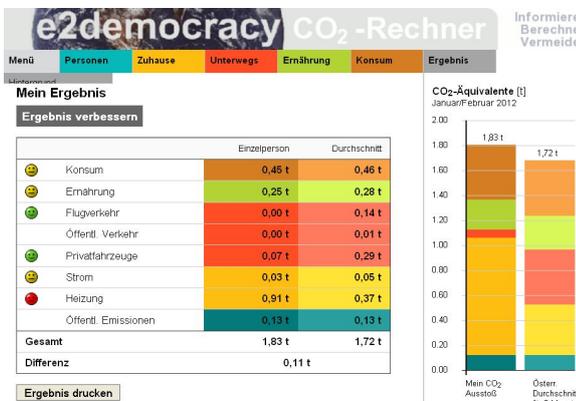
Seven similarly organised citizen panels in Austria (Bregenz and Mariazell region), Germany and Spain took part in this two year climate protection experiment. Regular individual monitoring of energy consumption and feedback of climate balances generated by CO₂ calculators encouraged energy saving. Together with the provision of additional information and community support, this was the basis for inducing pro-climate behavioural change and enabled profound impact analyses.

Basic data

Project title:	e2democracy
Project team:	G. Aichholzer, D. Allhutter, S. Strauß (part of an int. consortium)
Duration:	08/2009 – 04/2014
Funded by:	FWF: I 169-G16 (Austrian part)
Website:	www.e2democracy.eu

Key results

Representative opinion polls at the beginning of the project showed a high willingness to contribute to climate protection. In Austria, over 90 per cent of respondents declared they were ready to contribute to CO₂ reduction substantially; about 70 per cent were willing to check their own efforts in energy saving through individual CO₂ balances. Nevertheless, registration with the citizen panels showed a strong contrast to the stated willingness, and all regions came strikingly short of the expected rate. Ultimately, despite the demanding format (length and regular contributions) 1,159 citizens participated.



Regular CO₂ balances motivated participants to save energy

The participation processes aimed at increased sensitisation and sustained changes towards pro-climate behaviour. On these effects, the results showed an ambivalent outcome. The regular monitoring and feedback process with different possibilities of comparison served well as a tool for orientation and motivation. Being embedded in a collective process – the experience of being part of a local group and an international initiative – fostered community building, supported individual efforts and motivated participants to change their behaviour. The CO₂ reduction targets were reached in five of the seven panels. Two out of three participants in Austria and Germany improved their CO₂ balance by at least two per cent per year, whereas only every second participant reached this goal in Spain.

The possibility of e-participation proved to be the most important prerequisite for reaching higher participation rates; two thirds chose this form. However, it also entailed lower commitment to the whole undertaking. Citizens who participated via Internet withdrew from the process significantly more often and earlier. By contrast, participants highly valued the opportunity to use a media mix (traditional and electronic) for taking part.

What should be done?

Community-building forms of participation that use local citizen panels in combination with individual CO₂ balancing for encouragement and guidance can contribute to climate protection. However, to make optimal use of this potential, some challenges need to be addressed.

- Engagement initiatives particularly attract citizens with high environmental awareness. Therefore specific measures are necessary to involve those parts of the society who are not yet sensitised to climate protection.
- Mobilising citizens for climate protection requires convincing evidence that all main actors, above all companies and the public sector, contribute their share.
- Participation should under no circumstances be only possible in electronic form. Providing traditional formats also ensures a broader inclusion of different groups.
- Achieving changes towards pro-climate behaviour on an individual level requires political support. It is crucial to create framework conditions that enable and facilitate alternative courses of action in various areas of life – from climate-friendly transport options to pro-climate choices of energy supply and nutrition.

Further reading

Aichholzer, G., Cimander, R., Kubicek, H., 2013, Can information save energy? A three country comparison of words and actions in participatory local climate protection projects, *International Journal of Electronic Governance* Vol. 6, No. 1, 66-85.
www.inderscience.com/storage/f127594632111108.pdf

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