

# What can TA Learn from ‘the People’?

## A Case Study of the German Citizens’ Dialogues on Future Technologies

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# INTRODUCTION

# The German Citizens' Dialogues on Future Technologies

- The project 'Bürgerdialoge' (Citizens' Dialogues) initiated by the **German Federal Ministry of Education and Research** aimed to incorporate the perspectives of citizens regarding future technologies and topics.
- The dialogues were on **three topics**, one per dialogue round:



'Energy Technologies  
for the Future'



'High-tech Medicine'



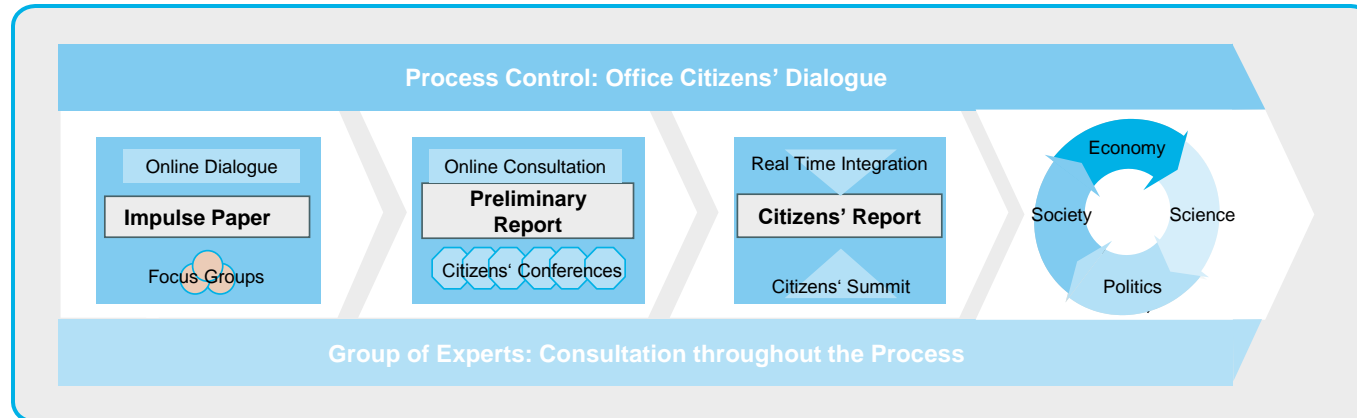
'Demographic Change'

# Format of the Dialogues



- **21<sup>st</sup> Century Town Hall Meeting:** Relatively high number of citizens compared to other participation formats (i.e. focus groups), about 600 to 800 per dialogue round.
- **Qualitative and quantitative:** face-to-face interactions and discussions are networked and brought together
- **Consensus:** the ‘sum’ of all discussions forms concrete recommendations for representatives of politics, economy, civil society → Citizens’ Report

# Structure of the Dialogues



**Phase 1:** Identification of socially relevant topics and their **reflection** with citizens (focus groups and online opinions) → **Impulse Paper**

**Phase 2:** Citizens formulate **hopes and fears** regarding the topics and first recommendations (citizens' conference, community workshops and online consultation, comments by the experts) → **Preliminary Report**

**Phase 3:** Citizens develop concrete **recommendations** regarding science, economy, politics and society (citizens' suggestions and real time integration of online opinions during the summit) → **Citizens' Report**

**Phase 4:** The results of the citizens' dialogue are discussed and reflected upon by representatives of **science, economy, politics and society**.

Source: IFOK GmbH

# ITAS within the Citizens' Dialogues

- Support of concept and implementation of the individual dialogue modules (together with project partners).
- **Contextual preparation** of the topics: How can technological topics be prepared and designed for citizens (based on the understanding of citizens as experts for the everyday)?
- **Evaluation and methodological shaping** of the dialogues (together with project partners).
- **Our own research interests:**
  - What we can learn for (participatory) technology assessment concerning formats, implementation, topics, etc.
  - Are there more general findings beyond the case study?
  - How do discussions take place?
  - What expectations do participants have?
  - What impact factors can indicate influence in the political field and among experts?





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# INSIGHTS

# Citizens – the Center of Attention

- Who are they?
  - Recruited mainly via calling, but also online application possible.
  - Impression: Rather **high education, high commitment** (e.g. active volunteering or engaged in politics) and people ‘who have the time’ – in general engaged citizens with high expectations.
  - Problem: Several groups are **under-represented**. (e.g. marginalized ones, but also young parents).
  
- What do they expect from the dialogues?
  - Very positive about the fact that they were asked for their opinion.
  - Mostly **enthusiastic** about the discussions and the atmosphere of the dialogue events.
  - Sceptical but hopeful about the implementation of their recommendations.





# Citizens – and ‘the Others’

- Citizens as ‘experts for the everyday’ **open up discourse** often discuss according to their individual social situation.
- **‘Clash’ of citizens** (‘we want to be taken seriously’), **experts** (‘they don’t know enough to make well-grounded decisions’) and **political side** (‘how do we ‘use’ the citizens’ statements within a representative democracy? Often not legitimized.’)
- **Transfer of results into political system** difficult due to ‘protective’ legislative power, institutional irritations, missing coordination with political processes



- Both for experts and political field: their own understanding of their roles makes it difficult for representatives to regard citizens on equal terms.



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# LESSONS LEARNED

# Lessons Learned – Reframing of Topics

## Energy Technologies:

### BMBF frame:

- Energy efficiency
- Renewable energy
- Energy grids
- Bridging technologies

### Citizens reframed:

- Decentralization of energy production
- Political framework in form of taxes and new laws
- Large investments in research
- Education, information and consultation by the government

## High-Tech Medicine:

### BMBF frame:

- Neuronal implants
- Tele medicine
- Intensive and palliative care

### Citizens reframed:

- Data protection
- Informed self-determination
- Equity concerning access to new technologies
- Compassion and the role of technology

# Lessons Learned – Handling of Topics

Participation as a way to explore and integrate contextual perspectives and expertise, for example:

- Energy: Here, the citizens put topics in a **societal context**; national considerations with aspects of individual actions.
- High-tech medicine: The citizens often expressed **individual concerns** in the context of the health care system.
- Demographic change: Here, **group and individual concerns** were expressed, but not directly related to technological aspects.





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# CONCLUSIONS

## Beyond ‘Just Another Case Study’?

- It appears to be important to give **accountability and credibility** to the participation process for it to be more than just an engagement exercise (‘participation’).
- However, assessing the **impact** remains difficult.
- The format of the participation process determines the way the **plurality of rationales** can be sustained throughout the process and in the results.

## What can this mean for TA?

- The **reframing of the topics** by the participants (to better fit their everyday lives) enables TA to widen its perspectives and can shift foci.
- The dialogue processes may enable a certain ‘**sensitivity**’ of TA regarding issues important to the public and integrate this into the consultation of political decision makers.
- Participation as an integral part of the assessment process, the incorporation of different kinds of knowledge can enable a **transdisciplinary approach** to include the ‘dialogue of many’ for more networked and inter-related knowledge regarding TA.

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**Questions and comments welcome!**

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