

## **Engaging citizens through deliberative mini publics: evaluation of a German consensus conference on genome editing**

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### INTRODUCTION

In response to a rising European discourse around ‘erosions of democracy’, more and more organisations are taking a ‘deliberative turn’. Especially within contested fields of emerging technologies, deliberative communication approaches, such as consensus conference or other so-called ‘mini-publics’, have become a prominent tool to engage the public in science-based policy-making. Mobilising concepts of input, throughout and output legitimacy, this study analyses a recent consensus conference on genome editing initiated by the German Federal Institute for Risk Assessment. Drawing upon observations, surveys and semi-structured interviews with participating citizens, scientists, organisers and invited stakeholders, the presentation illustrates difficulties in ensuring inclusive input from across society. From a processual, or ‘throughput’ perspective, it identifies conflicts between the information requirements emerging from deliberative ideals and empirical information sourcing practice. In terms of output, the conference had its greatest impact on the personal learning of participants. Ensuring an impact on wider policy-making emerged as more challenging.

### METHODOLOGY

The consensus conference, facilitated by an external communication agency, consisted of two preparation weekends, followed by a public conference where a panel of professional experts provided answers to questions posed by the citizens, based on which the citizens drafted a vote and presented it to stakeholders. An external scientific board reviewed all information material as well as the list of professional experts from which participants could select. Online and radio advertisements resulted in 147 citizen registrations. After categorising them according to socio-demographic criteria, 20 participants were randomly selected from each category. The presenter acted as an observer throughout the conference. All citizen participants received a questionnaire on their experience. In addition, 27 semi-structured interviews were conducted with participating citizens, stakeholders, professional experts and organisational staff. The content of all interview transcripts, observational notes and open questionnaire data was analysed in MAXQDA using legitimacy

criteria deducted from the literature as a coding framework. Closed questionnaire data was analysed descriptively using SPSS.

## RESULTS

Both interviews and surveys indicate the difficulties of the conference in ensuring inclusive input from across society with interviewees discussing how the event mainly attracted interested and better-educated parts of society. While the survey suggests that participants were able to include their opinion overall, some interviewees supported allegations of unequally distributed abilities to engage during the process. The majority of citizen participants agreed that processes were transparent and information materials helpful and balanced. A number of citizen interviewees complained though that they were left alone in sourcing additional information. From the organisers perspective, ad-hoc requests for additional information collided with deliberative and stakeholder requests for external review, transparency and independence. When it comes to the question of consensus, pluralistic views on the topic seemed to inhibit the possibility to find a consensus, which, for some interviewees, diluted the ground for a clear impact. The conference showed its greatest impact on the personal learning of participants. Ensuring an impact on wider policy-making emerged as more challenging.

## DISCUSSION

Resonating with previous studies, this case illustrates difficulties of deliberative mini-publics in ensuring an output beyond individual learning. Organisers should therefore put greater emphasis on making their results heard. In doing so, they will likely have to continue to balance requests for impact on the one hand and independence on the other hand. While the adherence to deliberative ideals, such as the provision of balanced and externally reviewed information, may help to find this balance, it can be a detriment to the need to facilitate increasingly dynamic information seeking processes. New hybrid formats that combine face-to-face deliberation with internet-based interaction may be able to address some of these challenges. More precisely, they could help participants in their wider information sourcing. If combined with novel advertisement and communication strategies, it may also help attract more diverse citizen groups to address issues of inclusiveness. In advocating for such formats, one should not underestimate the challenges online participation raise though including remaining inclusiveness challenges and their potentially even greater struggle in providing unifying outputs.