

The use of public engagement in tackling climate change

Briefing Paper

16/01/2011

Ingrid Prikken

Simon Burall

Michael Kattirtzi

involve

Acknowledgements

This paper was written by Ingrid Prikken and Simon Burall and draws on the literature review produced by Michael Kattirzti during his research internship at Involve.

In addition, the briefing has been informed by the theory for a distributed dialogue and its rationale as described in Involve's pamphlet "[Talking for a Change – a distributed dialogue approach to complex issues](#)" alongside the experience of Involve - and others in the field of public participation - in designing and delivering various engagement processes around climate change.

About Involve

Involve are experts in public engagement, participation and dialogue.

We carry out research and deliver training to inspire citizens, communities and institutions to run and take part in high-quality public participation processes, consultations and community engagement.

We believe passionately in a democracy where citizens are empowered to take and influence the decisions that affect their lives.

Drawing from compelling results and evaluation findings of a range of public dialogues around climate change, Involve argue there is clear evidence that engaging people in a meaningful way has the potential to change attitudes and behaviours towards tackling climate change. In this way, public engagement can complement legislative changes that force change, as well as the government's agenda of 'nudge'. Only by involving the public in decision-making and in the design of projects will the government be able to bring about the changes in public attitudes and behaviour of the scale that is required.

Introduction

Involve's work with deliberative dialogue on climate change dates back to 2009 when it took part in the most extensive global consultation ever held and the first of its kind: World Wide Views on Climate Change.¹ More than 4000 people in 38 countries took part in a simultaneous, day long deliberative event in the run-up to the United Nations Climate Change Conference (COP15) held that December in Copenhagen. Involve was responsible for running the UK leg of this process. The event demonstrated that it is possible to engage the public in complex debates about climate change, that it can be an enjoyable experience, and most importantly, that people want their voices heard.

Drawing from the experience of delivering this process and others, Involve is developing a participatory framework called Distributed Dialogue. This approach presents a fundamentally different way for the government to engage with the public about climate change. The model advocates the need for ongoing and active participation of citizens, where control of the conversation lies with both government *and* civil society; a conversation that requires government to play the vital role of creating an environment in which it can happen, but also requires it to give up trying to control all aspects of the conversation. Such engagement will make use of networks of community leaders and activists to reach citizens at the local level. It will bring together, build on and increase existing community efforts to tackle global climate change.

Involve's experience, as well as evidence of others in the field of public engagement in the UK and beyond who have been involved in similar dialogue processes, provides a solid foundation for arguing that such public engagement processes have the potential for far-reaching impacts on individuals' perceptions, attitudes and behaviour regarding climate change, if they are suitably tailored to the circumstances.

This briefing sets-out a summary of a literature review conducted by Involve and explores:

- The current developments in public attitudes to climate science, trust in climate science and climate change debate in general;
- Insights into the extent people are willing to change their behaviour to reduce their impact on climate change and if there are any shifts in that willingness; and,
- The potential for impact of public engagement processes on individuals' attitudes towards climate change.

Trends in public attitudes to climate change

Changes in public attitudes show the somewhat erratic nature of people's attitude towards climate change. If belief in climate change is falling, one fear is that it will be harder to persuade the public to support actions to address the problem.

This reality should be taken into account when thinking about engaging the public with climate change. Public trust in climate science and overall belief in climate change is influenced by a set of constantly evolving external factors. As a result, public attitudes are not static; polls and surveys during the winter of 2009/2010 suggest that there was a dip in public faith in climate science. For example, an Ipsos MORI survey (2009-2010ⁱⁱ) found that the percentage of people that believe climate change is a reality dropped significantly from 44% in 2009 to 31% in 2010.

A diverse set of factors could underlie these apparent changes in attitude, such as the climate change controversies of the University of East Anglia, the harsh winter of 2009/2010 and the failure of the United Nations COP-15 talks in Copenhagen.

It is still too early to be conclusive about climate change attitudes in 2011, but some reports show an overall upward trend in belief in climate change.ⁱⁱⁱ However, considering other polls from 2011, it appears that uncertainty, lack of trust and scepticism are still high. The Guardian suggests that a longer term consequence of the Winter 2009/2010 reports may be a greater polarisation of belief in climate change being a threat. The Ipsos MORI poll^{iv} suggests that environmental concerns appear to be shifting towards energy security, rather than global warming and climate change.

In addition, while the public might be exposed to more information shaping their ideas and opinions about climate change, there appears to be a decrease in the extent to which the public actually feel 'knowledgeable' on the subject.^v

Recent trends in behaviour change

The literature on public understanding of climate change indicates widespread awareness of the issue and a general concern, but limited behavioural response.^{vi} There appears to be willingness to do *something* for the environment. However, there is considerable scepticism about whether individual changes in behaviour can make a difference to limiting climate change. There is a willingness to try, as long as these behaviours do not have too much of an impact on individuals' lifestyles. Overall it seems that 'going green' has become more acceptable as mainstream behaviour – over half of the respondents disagreed that green behaviour is an 'alternative lifestyle' in 2009, whilst almost a third disagreed with this view in 2007.^{vii} There seems to be substantial belief in the need for a collective effort: before individuals can be expected to make bigger changes, governments, businesses and other countries need to pull their weight too. Nonetheless, survey results such as the 2010 Ipsos MORI survey^{viii} found that 30% believes individuals can have a significant impact, and over 40% think they can have some impact.

It appears a broad range of factors influence the willingness to change behaviour. Individual and social barriers include for example: lack of knowledge, uncertainty and scepticism, lack of action from government, other priorities, and reluctance of changing lifestyles or sacrificing quality of life and pre-established social norms^{ix}.

There seems to be a general trend of expressing more support for the less intrusive and less expensive behaviours. A DEFRA survey^x shows what proportion of the population would be willing to make certain behaviour changes. Recycling and home insulation are thought to be taken up well,

whereas reducing energy and water use, food wastage and using a more fuel efficient car were deemed to be less popular behaviours, even though the possible personal financial savings of these behaviours would at first sight suggest they are more salient for individuals than recycling. It is worth considering that if people were asked the same question 20 years ago, when recycling rates across the UK were less than 3%, it is unlikely that they would have been as willing to recycle. As the Green Alliance^{xi} argues, recycling is a strange environmental behaviour for people to adopt with little or no reward, but with the help of supporting infrastructure, clear messaging, social norms and high visibility in a local area it has become commonplace.

Although willingness to change behaviour appears to be on the rise, some caution is needed because of the **values-action gap**: people say that they are willing to make changes, yet there is a discrepancy between intentions and actions, and the so-called **rebound effect** which could occur when some of the savings from energy efficiency are cancelled out by changes in people's behaviour. For example turning up the heat in a newly insulated house or spending the money saved on bills on a flight to Spain.^{xii}

How public engagement can help

Involve, in common with all those who have witnessed or taken part in well run public engagement processes, knows that involving citizens more deeply in difficult problems has the potential to make a significant impact on individual's attitudes and behaviours.

Deliberative dialogues potentially hold great benefits for both **policy makers** and **participants**. A common benefit of dialogue identified by policy makers is greater confidence in public policy making. Other benefits include creating better policy, saving time and money, raising awareness and enable learning. For the participants, taking part in a dialogue process can bring benefits such as influence, learning, a more positive perception of government, social benefits and personal satisfaction. Participants see benefits in making a difference, and value seeing that something has happened as a result of their collective input.^{xiii}

It is a myth that ordinary citizens cannot be engaged in complex issues such as climate change. On the contrary, participants in past climate change dialogues felt able to engage with the material. On top of this, it appears that confidence in talking about the topic increased, not just at the event, but also after the events with other people. Importantly, participants enjoy being part of these dialogue processes and commonly aspire to be involved in other engagement processes in the future.

Involve argues that policymakers should engage as part of their approach for changing behaviours and promoting more sustainable living. Studying the results and evaluations of a number of past engagement processes around climate change there is convincing evidence that public engagement can have a profound impact on attitudes and behaviour.

Impact on attitudes

Raising awareness and understanding

After DEFRA's public engagement process on climate change, participants claimed that the event helped them to clarify their thinking (94%), and learn something new (79%).^{xiv} Also, more than 70% said they had changed their thinking as a result. The dialogue made two thirds feel more personally responsible for taking action to reduce their impact on climate change.

The Big Energy Shift – a public dialogue to find out how the Government could encourage households and communities to take up low carbon measures – had an impressive impact on the knowledge and attitudes of participants. All householders reported that they had learnt something

new by the end of the dialogue and almost 90% said that their attitudes had changed as a result.^{xv} In particular, the dialogue sparked interest in green technologies, and increased their appeal.^{xvi}

Citizens' Forums can also impact on people's attitudes to climate science and technology. In the case of the Community Xchange – a deliberative dialogue project run by the British Science Association between 2006 and 2008 intended to strengthen links between the public, scientists, and decision makers – participants were surprised at how well they were able to understand the scientific issues being discussed, and they felt empowered to make valid contributions to the debate.^{xvii}

At the Citizens' Advisory Forum – a project set up in 2010 by the Living with Environmental Change partnership in order to take public attitudes and values into strategy building – nearly all participants said that they had learnt something that they did not know before, and all participants indicated that it helped them to think more clearly. They also all said that the forum enabled them to think about some issues for the first time.^{xviii}

Impact on perceptions

Deliberative dialogues could potentially have significantly high impacts on people's perceptions towards climate change as well: after the DEFRA Summit more than 80% of the participants at this event said they now thought climate change was a serious issue for citizens, compared to 65% at the pre-summit workshop.

Evaluation of Risky Business – a project ran by Sciencewise in 2005 seeking to engage students in a policy discussion about climate change – found that participants were more concerned about climate change and its reality following the project.^{xix} It was also found that over 90% of the 475 respondents thought that climate change is happening now, the vast majority of which blamed human activity.^{xx}

Impact on attitude towards responsibility and own actions

The evaluation results from the various public engagement processes that were looked at for this purpose all record significant changes in attitude. These attitudinal changes, particularly in the realm of personal responsibility and own actions, suggest a potential for impact on changing behaviour as well.

For example, in the evaluation of the DEFRA public engagement process, two thirds of the interviewees said that the Summit helped to make them feel more personally responsible for taking action to reduce their impact on climate change. Nearly 80% said they were likely to change what they did as a result.

Furthermore, the dialogue helped to convince some people that they were not alone in their pro-environmental concern and actions.^{xxi} The Big Energy Shift also saw a significant increase in the number of people who thought that individuals should be responsible for technologies in the home – increasing from almost 50% to 70%.^{xxii}

When asked what the most valuable benefit of participating in the Citizens' Advisory Forum was, one member said that it broadened his perspective on climate change and this prompted him to research sustainable energy sources for a planned move of home. Another said that the forum had changed his ideas of climate change and what he as an individual could do to slow the process.^{xxiii}

The deliberative survey conducted in the Geraldton 2029 deliberative project on sustainability appears to have influenced some sceptics' attitudes towards environmental behaviours. For example, an opponent of recycling revealed that the deliberative forum had caused him to be a strong supporter of recycling.^{xxiv}

The impact of engagement processes on climate change does not seem to stop at the individual participant. Evidence suggests that it has a much wider impact, because the participants talk about their experience and learning to others. For example, the 15 people interviewed after taking part in

the DEFRA public engagement process had collectively talked to at least 450 people – if all 152 participants spoke to a similar number of people, the Summit potentially reached around 4,500 people. This is particularly valuable, as information from peers is said to be more trusted than information from other sources.^{xxv}

Build trust in government and positive impact on government policy

Engaging citizens around climate change issues can have a positive impact on government policy approaches at the local, national and international level. For example, the deliberative survey in the Geraldton area had a far reaching impact on communities and local politics: results showed strong community support had developed for working towards an ambitious sustainability agenda enabling policy makers to set more ambitious targets.^{xxvi}

Impact on behaviour change

While the evidence for the impact of dialogue on attitude is clearer, there is evidence that behaviours have changed too. For example, all participants at the DEFRA summit reported trying to change at least one action, of which recycling, turning off electrical appliances and changes in transportation mode were most common. Participants in the Big Energy Shift also reported having made changes to their personal behaviour, such as using electrical appliances less and switching them off when not in use. It is encouraging that almost 80% of the participants in the DEFRA engagement process said they were likely to change as a result of participating. Specific behaviour changes identified were: encouraging others to adopt green behaviours, reducing energy use, using the car less or walking, and wasting less water and food.^{xxvii} However, longitudinal data is currently lacking to allow any meaningful impact of dialogue on behaviour over time to be gauged.

A distributed dialogue approach

Nudge, sophisticated communication strategies or even legislation (shove) alone won't succeed in tackling climate change, which requires behaviour change and action at multiple levels of society.^{xxviii} The evidence from previous dialogues on climate change outlined in this paper, as well as engagement experience in other spheres (such as in crime or health), suggests that public engagement could have significant impact on people's attitudes and behaviours. However, if the potential benefits of public engagement are to be fully understood and realised, there is need for

- more evidence, particularly over longer periods of time
- more testing of what works in different contexts
- exploration of new methods and willingness of the Government to be open to piloting new methods and learning from these processes together with communities – from the local to the international level

Involve therefore advocate the scaling up of public engagement, and its evaluation, around climate change. Distributed dialogue provides a way of engaging a significant number of people in a long-term meaningful debate about complex and interlinked issues. Building such an ongoing conversation around climate change between government and citizens can potentially have great benefits. Tailoring the process to the circumstances and the audience will maximise the impact of public engagement on attitudes and behaviour.

Contact

Ingrid Prikken

Project Manager - Involve

ingrid@involve.org.uk

+44 (0) 2079206474

-
- ⁱ World Wide Views project information on Involve's website
<http://www.involve.org.uk/wvviews-on-climate-change-project-information/>
- ⁱⁱ Ipsos MORI Climate Change Omnibus January 2009 and January 2010
<http://www.ipsos-mori.com/researchpublications/researcharchive/poll.aspx?oltemId=2552>
- ⁱⁱⁱ Carrington, D., 2011. *Public belief in climate change weathers storm, poll shows*. The Guardian, 31 January.
<http://www.guardian.co.uk/environment/2011/jan/31/public-belief-climate-change>
- ^{iv} Ipsos MORI, 2011. *Energy Security is a top concern for Brits*
<http://www.ipsos-mori.com/researchpublications/researcharchive/2771/Energy-security-is-a-top-concern-for-Brits.aspx>
- ^v DEFRA, 2011. *Attitudes and knowledge towards biodiversity and the natural environment*.
<http://www.defra.gov.uk/statistics/files/Statistical-Release-13-April-2011-biodiversity1.pdf>
- ^{vi} Lorenzoni, I. Nicholson-Cole, S. and Whitmarsh, L, 2007. *Barriers perceived to engaging with climate change among the UK public and their policy implications*
http://glennumc.org/clientimages/41359/etf_barriers.pdf
- ^{vii} DEFRA, September 2009. *Public attitudes and behaviours towards the environment - tracker survey*
<http://www.defra.gov.uk/statistics/files/report-attitudes-behaviours2009.pdf>
- ^{viii} Ipsos MORI Climate Change Omnibus, January 2010.
<http://www.ipsosmori.com/researchpublications/researcharchive/poll.aspx?oltemId=2552>.
- ^{ix} Lorenzoni, I. Nicholson-Cole, S. and Whitmarsh, L. 2007. *Barriers perceived to engaging with climate change among the UK public and their policy implications*
http://glennumc.org/clientimages/41359/etf_barriers.pdf
- ^x DEFRA, 2007. Report and Questionnaire following survey of public attitudes and behaviours towards the environment: 2007
<http://www.defra.gov.uk/statistics/files/pas2007report.pdf>
- ^{xi} Green Alliance, 2011. *Bringing it home - Using behavioural insights to make green living policy work*
http://www.green-alliance.org.uk/uploadedFiles/Themes/Green_living/Bringing%20it%20home_AW_lowsingle.pdf
- ^{xii} Rowley, S., 2011. *Could the rebound effect undermine climate efforts?*. The Guardian, 22 February.
<http://www.guardian.co.uk/environment/blog/2011/feb/22/rebound-effect-climate-change>
- ^{xiii} Warburton, D.,, *Evidence counts – understanding the value of public dialogue*
<http://www.sciencewise-erc.org.uk/cms/assets/Uploads/Strategic-Research-documents/Evidence-CountsFull-report.pdf>
- ^{xiv} Warburton, D., 2008. *Evaluation of DEFRA's public engagement process on climate change*, pp.30-35.
- ^{xv} Rathouse, K. Devine-Wright, P., 2010. *Evaluation of the Big Energy Shift*, p.27.
<http://www.sciencewise-erc.org.uk/cms/assets/Uploads/Project-files/Final-BES-dialogue-evaluation-report-160810.pdf>
- ^{xvi} Rathouse, K., Devine-Wright, P., August 2010. *Evaluation of the Big Energy Shift*. Appendices B,D, E. See also discussion on p.45.
<http://www.sciencewise-erc.org.uk/cms/assets/Uploads/Project-files/Final-BES-dialogue-evaluation-report-160810.pdf>
- ^{xvii} Taylor-Gee, A., Juspall, B., 2010. *Community X-change: A voice for local communities*. British Science Association: London, 2010. p.6.
<http://www.sciencewise-erc.org.uk/cms/assets/Uploads/Project-files/Community-x-change-final-report2010.pdf>
- ^{xviii} Warburton, D., 2011. *LWEC Evaluation Report*. PP.51-53. See also analysis: p.3.
<http://www.lwec.org.uk/sites/default/files/LWEC%20Citiz%20Advisory%20Forum%20evaluation.pdf>
- ^{xix} Sciencewise pamphlet, 2008. *Risky Business*. p.2.
<http://www.sciencewise-erc.org.uk/cms/assets/Uploads/Project-files/J3793-Risky-Case-Study-020608LR.pdf>
- ^{xx} Sciencewise, 2008. *Reduce, reuse and recycle*. p.1.
<http://www.sciencewise-erc.org.uk/cms/assets/Uploads/Risky-Business-Final-Report.pdf>
- ^{xxi} Warburton, D., 2008. *Evaluation of DEFRA's public engagement process on climate change*, p.21 & p.31 .
- ^{xxii} Rathouse, K., Devine-Wright, P., 2010. Kathryn Rathouse, *Evaluation of the Big Energy Shift*. Appendices B,D, E. See also discussion on p.29.
<http://www.sciencewise-erc.org.uk/cms/assets/Uploads/Project-files/Final-BES-dialogue-evaluation-report-160810.pdf>
- ^{xxiii} Warburton, D. *LWEC Evaluation Report*. P.42.
- ^{xxiv} Hartz-Karp, J., and Tillmann, C., 2010, Geraldton 2029 and beyond. 2029 and Beyond Project: Geraldton. p.82.
- ^{xxv} Warburton, D., 2008. *Evaluation of DEFRA's public engagement process on climate change*, p.40.
- ^{xxvi} Hartz-Karp, J., and Tillmann, C., 2010. *Geraldton 2029 and beyond*. p.82.
http://www.bertelsmann-stiftung.de/cps/rde/xbcr/SID-2F361BED-59CF835B/bst_engl/Geraldton_engl.pdf
- ^{xxvii} Warburton, D., 2008. *Evaluation of DEFRA's public engagement process on climate change*, p.38.
- ^{xxviii} Burall, S., 2010. *Nudge, think or shove? Shifting values and attitudes towards sustainability*
<http://www.involve.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2011/03/Nudge-think-or-shove.pdf>