



From audience to partner: exploring innovative engagement approaches to boosting policy effectiveness (Ideas Lab)
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Lab Leader: Katja Rosenbohm (Head of Communication at the European Environmental Agency, Denmark)

Storytellers: Bjørn Bedsted (Danish Board of Technology, Denmark), Robin Ibens (De Geschoren Aap, Belgium), Katrien Rycken (Leuven 2030, Belgium)

This Ideas Lab was fully participatory, designed to give everyone in the room a voice in addressing the key issues of the session and producing actionable outcomes. Using the format of collective storytelling, the Lab examined and discussed communication approaches that can help foster citizen engagement in achieving European and national policy objectives. Participants explored ways of bringing about change – in people's perceptions, attitudes and behaviour – as the ultimate goal of policy interventions.

The session was opened by **Katja Rosenbohm** of the European Environmental Agency, who highlighted the complexity of citizen engagement. Although citizen engagement has become a mainstream activity over the last couple of years, it is far from a straightforward concept and must be developed. One approach is through the collaboration of agencies or organisations, which can work together to develop strategies at city level, before implementing them at national and international level. **Ms Rosenbohm** introduced the speakers, pointing out that **Mr Ibens** and **Ms Rycken** would be discussing citizen engagement at local level, whereas **Mr Bedsted** would illustrate strategies on a global scale.

The *storytelling* part of the Ideas Lab began with **Katrien Rycken** and **Robin Ibens** from Leuven. **Ms Rycken** discussed the Leuven 2030 campaign: an NGO project encouraging 100 000 Leuven residents to tackle climate change together and reduce their CO₂ emissions by 15%. She highlighted that the project's success was based on the combination of storytelling, scientific analysis and social power. Storytelling was vital in the communications campaign to inspire a whole community to undertake climate transition. In addition, the project sought expertise from actors from different professional backgrounds. A scientific report was prepared by experts to highlight scientific priorities, and a professional communication strategy was devised. This included promotion on local television and on local football shirts, among other strategies. The project worked with local actors including local restaurants and other partners in society, encouraging them to take steps towards reducing their footprint.

Robin Ibens explained the role of Leuven Switcht in climate action. A simple online tool was developed, allowing people to switch easily to green energy. An important aspect of the campaign was to highlight the tangible benefits for customers: reassuring people that it would not be expensive to switch provider and that they would save money in the long run. Furthermore, the campaign encouraged all Leuven residents to become ambassadors of the project and, consequently, of green energy. A prize-giving strategy was implemented and participants were encouraged to share information via social media. In addition, faces of local celebrities were used on campaign images.

The floor was then given to **Bjørn Bedsted**, who began with an introduction to the development of participatory methods in policy making. Such methods were introduced around 15 years ago at European level to allow stakeholders to react to global negotiations in research and innovation. However, no such tool existed for the general public. Mr Bedsted introduced his work with World Wide Views which created two-way consultation with the community, asking people for their



opinions on policy negotiations and encouraging policy-makers to use these views in negotiations at global venues such as the UN. People from across the world engage in online and in-person discussions regarding negotiations (e.g. on biodiversity) and the results are disseminated via press releases and social media. The project is a new model in decision making, making it more participatory and ultimately increasing trust between the general public and policy-makers. Rather than pushing predetermined messages, policy-makers become facilitators of global dialogue.

The Ideas Lab then moved to the next part, where participants were divided into several groups to discuss questions in light of the case studies they had heard. Questions included: "How did projects impact participants' perceptions, attitudes and behaviours?", "Given alternatives, why was the approach chosen?", "Who was the target audience?" and "Were any groups missing?" The questions were intended to be starting points and participants engaged in lively discussions, and producing three recommendations per group on citizen engagement strategies.

One topic discussed was the importance of following up with participants and the difficulties of re-engagement. It was suggested that participants could have the option of staying in contact after the survey or project, in order to create a feeling of community. Participants also highlighted the difficulty of ensuring long-standing change. They discussed strategies to measure behavioural change in the case of Mr Bedsted's project, and highlighted the importance of the conversion of results. In terms of the details of communication campaigns, the importance of ambassadors in connecting with people's emotions through storytelling was clear. Using simple language was also considered vital when conveying a message to a diverse audience. Discussions also turned to the role of social media, as participants debated the effectiveness of endorsing messages on platforms such as Facebook. Several groups discussed the inclusiveness of the projects, showing a desire to know more about the profiles of the people involved, including education level and age. It was pointed out that a project could exclude certain sectors of society by being exclusively an online tool. In terms of reach, some people suggested that the scale of the Leuven project was ideal, commenting that citizen engagement strategies divided by borough could be implemented for larger cities.

After engaging in group discussions, participants compared their findings. Three key areas within the recommendations became clear: the use of ambassadors and emotion; the importance of highlighting the benefits to be gained by individuals in campaigns such as these; and finally the need to focus on the goals of the project in order to implement effective, long-standing change.

Katja Rosenbohm wrapped up the session, thanking the participants for their inspiring contributions. The input would be collected and reported back to her network, with the results used to help improve future citizen engagement strategies. There are many opportunities for citizen engagement, and the session helped to draw out discussions on how to carry out strategies with maximum effect. Listening to people's real concerns is key, as well as using partnerships to work together for a greater impact. To conclude, participants were asked to sum up their feelings on the session in one word. By far the most common was "inspired."