

**Consensus conference (CC)**

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# Consensus Conference

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## 1 Introduction

The consensus conference is a participatory method, which is aimed at involving the public in the policy making process, and informing policymakers and experts about what citizens find important and why. Hereby it can raise public awareness, may lead to better decisions, may increase the legitimacy and accountability of decision-making and it may stimulate learning (as well for the public as for the decision-makers and experts). Denmark was the first country to organize such a consensus conference. The consensus conference is developed by the U.S. National Institutes of Health (NIH) in 1977, which wanted to settle a controversy over breast cancer screening. The NIH's consensus conferences evolved into a way to transfer new medical knowledge and devices to clinical practice, and several European nations imported the model to answer similar questions of medical research and practice. Denmark was the first country that altered the format to involve citizens rather than experts and expanded the purview beyond medicine to broad questions of technology, thereby creating the participatory consensus conference (Jørgensen, 1995).

Important characteristics of this method are that the public determines the agenda for the conference and chooses which experts to consult. They gain knowledge about the issue at hand during the process, which enables informed discussions (as opposed to focus groups). The citizens participating in the consensus conference write a report presenting their ideas on the issue. Although the name of this tool suggests a focus on consensus, the citizens are also asked to indicate in the report their points of disagreement.

The consensus conference is usable for topics which are socially relevant, which imply technological/scientific knowledge and which have to deal with unclear and divergent opinions and points of view.

## 2 Methodology

The consensus conference aims to give a voice to the public by forming a citizen panel. The panel (a group of 10–30 citizens) formulates the questions to be taken up and participates in the selection of experts to answer these questions. At the end a report is produced containing the consensus view (expectations, concerns and recommendations) of the (informed) citizens regarding the issue at hand. Though the panel's report cannot be considered to represent THE voice of the public, it represents the ideas and opinions of a diverse group of citizens who are normally not involved in the policy process. Outcomes can be viewed as a collection of ideas and viewpoints of the public, and can as such be used as input for assessments (together with other stakeholders' ideas and points of view).

The methodology of the Danish model of the consensus conference is quite precise and detailed. However, many variants of this tool exist. Also, this methodology is conducted under different names than 'consensus conference', mainly because of a (cultural) preference for a smaller focus (or no focus at all) on consensus. The methodology of the 'citizens' jury' resembles the consensus conference; both are specific types of citizen panels. Since many variants of both methods exist, it is hard to indicate the exact differences between the two methods. For instance, the citizen's jury held in the context of the River Dialogue in The Netherlands in 2003 followed the same procedure (see below), apart from the fact that the citizen panel did not decide on the agenda of the conference and on which experts to consult. Some say that a difference between the two methods is that the meetings of the consensus conference are generally open for public and media, while the meetings of a citizens' jury are not (this is however not true for the River Dialogue citizens' jury), or that the time scale of a consensus conference is more precise than that of a citizens' jury (Rowe & Frewer, 2000). The procedure of both methods can be changed on the basis of specific design criteria, as a consequence of which differences are gradual or even nonexistent.

### 3 Process

The steps of the Danish model of the consensus conference are commonly as follows:

1. A steering committee of known partisan authorities is chosen, who represent different and opposing perspectives, who are familiar with the full scope of the topic and who are willing to support an unbiased effort. The steering committee will oversee the organization of the consensus conference and the fairness and correctness of its informational materials.
2. Participants are recruited. This can be done by placing advertisements, or by sending letters randomly. Volunteers should send a one–page letter describing the their background and their reasons for wanting to participate.
3. From the replies 10 to 30 (mostly about 15; 30 with multilingual panels) are chosen, who roughly represent the demographic breadth of the country’s population and who lack prior knowledge of or partisan interest in the topic.
4. A background paper (information brochure) is commissioned that maps the political terrain surrounding the issue; this is screened and approved by the steering committee.
5. During a preparatory weekend, the citizen panel discusses the background paper, and formulates questions for experts. The panel should also get the opportunity during this weekend to get to know one another and to develop their ability to reason together.
6. the citizen panel chooses the types of experts that are required. A group of experts is assembled; the citizen panel chooses itself which experts from this group are invited to answer their questions (which are based on information provided by the steering committee). The group of experts covers the broad dimensions of the problem (ethical, societal, technical etc.)
7. During a second preparatory weekend, the citizen panel discusses the background reading provided by the steering committee, refines their questions and revises the expert panel list to suit their needs. (Choosing the experts can also take place solely during the second weekend.)
8. The experts prepare oral and written responses to the panel's questions, using language understandable by ordinary people.
9. An open public forum (a consensus conference) is announced, in which the citizen and expert panel will meet together, attracting media, legislators and interested citizens.
10. On day one of the actual consensus conference, each expert speaks for about 15–30 minutes in response to the questions posed by the citizen panel, follow–up questions from the citizen panel are answered and, as time allows, from the audience.
11. After the public session, the citizen panel discusses what it has heard.
12. On day two the citizen panel cross–examines the expert panel.
13. After this public session on day two and on day three, the citizen panel deliberates, and prepares a report that summarizes their points of consensus and disagreement. The citizen panel fully controls the report’s content, but may be assisted by secretaries and editors.
14. On day four the expert panel gets the chance to correct outright factual misstatements in the report, but not otherwise comments on it.
15. The citizen panel presents its report at a national press conference; reports are 15–30 pages long, clearly reasoned and nuanced in judgment.  
([www.co-intelligence.org/P-ConsensusConference3.html](http://www.co-intelligence.org/P-ConsensusConference3.html))

In most cases, the report is publicized to confront the broad public with it, for instance by the use of local dialogues, leaflets and videos.

Policy makers can use the report as input for assessments.

### 4 Review

## 4.1 Evaluation results

### Policy processes

This tool can contribute to policy processes in several ways. Dependent on the phase of the policy process in which the consensus conference is deployed, the tool can be helpful in recognizing problems, identifying conflicting assumptions, exploring possible solutions, analyzing policy proposals, selecting policy options, evaluating policy options and bringing poorly performing policy options to light; all from a citizens' point of view.

The consensus conference can contribute to the legitimacy of decision making. It is an “opportunity for those with little power to obtain information and to be heard, and thus an opportunity for more democratic decision-making on the use and regulation of new technology” (Andersen & Jaeger, 1999). The consensus conference can help to reduce the distance between policy makers and the public, and it enables citizens to engage in deliberation about the decisions that need to be taken and it can generate support for measures to be taken.

The consensus conference can also contribute to the accountability of policy processes, as participants get an inside view in the decision-making process and feel co-responsible for the process and its outcomes. The tool is a way for a government to become more responsive to the concerns of the public and to create transparency and to give access. Open access of the people to public institutions is needed to give them a share of ownership ('this is my policy maker') and create a sense of trustworthiness ('they have nothing to hide') (Huitema & Van de Kerkhof, 2006).

With respect to the contributions to policy processes a few remarks have to be made.

Though, in statistical terms, the citizen panel cannot be considered a representative sample of the public (representative for all ages, socio-economic classes, places of residence, ideas, preferences etc.), the citizen panel can be seen as a group of people that 'resemble' the public, in terms of representing different social perspectives rather than a demographic representation (Brown, 2006). This group of citizens can bring to light certain problems or aspects concerning the topic that were not recognized before. It is the question however, whether this tool is the best option when aiming at making explicit new problems, or unique aspects of problems, ideas, underlying assumptions or points of view. For this goal, tools that focus more on underlying assumptions, such as the Repertory Grid Technique, are probably more suited.

The name of the tool implies that a consensus has to be found. Finding a consensus would mean that deviating ideas are lost, which would be disadvantageous in a search for new aspects of problems. However, this is not true for many past instances. And according to Joss (2000) the citizen panel is asked to pay attention in their report to conflicting points of view (disagreement). Because finding a consensus is often not a central issue, some countries prefer to use another name for the consensus conference, e.g. public debate or public forum.

Although discussion between the citizen panel and the experts is part of the conference, in practice there appears to be little interaction between the experts and the citizens, in the sense that experts and citizens do not work out differences together. This is a point of attention, since this interaction can lead to more, or richer outcomes (and more satisfied participants).

Another thing to keep in mind is that the way this participatory tool is shaped probably induces citizens to codify their knowledge in “expert-terms”. They base themselves solely on expert-knowledge when writing their report. It is not hard to imagine that the citizen panel feels social pressure to deliver a “scientific sound” document. As a consequence, it is quite well possible that specific “lay” knowledge that does not fit in with this format is omitted. This would mean not *all* aspects concerning a problem are made explicit.

### Operational aspects

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According to Joss (2000) the time and costs that are needed to organize a consensus conference might easily be underestimated; it takes more than one year to organize a 4–days–conference and in man–months it takes even about four years. The financial costs of organizing a typical consensus conference are about 166.000 euros (Joss, 2000).

The data input that is needed in this tool is not high; only a certain amount of expert input is needed to prepare the background paper and to answer the citizen panel's questions.

The tool is fairly transparent, or by any means, it *can* be transparent. Transparency depends very much on specific design characteristics. For instance, how are the participants recruited, how is the background paper established, are the participants really free in choosing the experts they want etcetera.

The results of the consensus conference are restricted to information about the group of which the (citizen) panel is a sample: the public. Though the citizen panel can be asked to think about long–term problems, the present is the reference; for a thorough analysis of long–term effects another tool is probably better suited, like the use of scenarios. As for the geographic coverage of this tool it is hard to give precise indications. For instance, consensus conferences were held in the past to discuss ozone in the upper atmosphere and genetic modification; these are not local issues. Probably this tool is suited for all problems that concern citizens; on a local, national, regional or global level, but using the tool at a higher level of scale will be more challenging in terms of participant selection, how to deal with cultural differences, language etcetera.

## 4.2 Experiences

There is much experience with consensus conferences all over the world. A list of European and non–European consensus conferences is provided below. Unfortunately, not many evaluations are available that provide information about the extent to which consensus conferences affected policy processes in the past. This is probably partly due to the fact that the main goal of past consensus conferences was not to improve policy processes, but to stimulate public discussion and to increase public learning (e.g. Canadian consensus conference on food biotechnology; see Einsiedel & Eastlick, 2000). The evaluations that are available seem to convey that past consensus conferences did not have significant political influence (see for instance Einsiedel, Jelsøe & Breck, 2001).

Most examples show that the consensus conference delivers a new (citizens') view on the particular topic; hereby, a consensus conference can focus attention on certain aspects of the topic that were not considered before. A conclusion of the Australian consensus conference on gene technology in the food chain (1999) was e.g. that “science and industry have to take account of the concerns of citizens about ethics, the environment, the right of choice and information, and many others, if they wish to win public support not only for gene technology but also from consumers and for science itself” (McKay, 1999). An important lesson that can be learned from this and other past experiences is that the diffusion of the results of a consensus conference (the emerging of a broad public debate) depends to a large extent on mass media.

Vandenabeele & Goorden (2004) evaluated the Belgian consensus conference on genetic testing. They conclude that there was little interaction between the participating experts and citizens. The emphasis was very much on one–way–communication, or on extensive monologues of the experts and a question–and–answer–pattern afterwards. They furthermore stress the influence of the press. “Journalists are trained to blow up disagreements instead of focusing on the agreements. If only one journalist picked up the conflicts within a citizen group, it was feared by citizens that the importance of the final report would be reduced and perhaps not taken seriously by politicians. Lay people know this and therefore strive for consensus (Andersen & Jæger, 1999, p. 331)”. Also they mention that the diversity within the citizen panel became a problem. A growing conflict with one participant arose, resulting in endless, not very useful, discussions. Furthermore, they observed that the organizer and facilitators had an enormous faith in the consensus conference as a method. With a central role for citizens the role of the experts is adapted to the questions put forward by these citizens. The focus for the facilitation process is on cooperative skills and expert information. According to Vandenabeele & Goorden this focus hides, paradoxically, an inability to deal with the type of argumentation that can be expected from citizens. Secondly they observe that the facilitation process confirms the image of the layperson with his or her many questions. The emphasis was on

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seeking answers and the expectation that expert knowledge could alleviate any concerns citizens may have.

Joss&Bellucci (2000) evaluated the Austrian consensus conference on ozone in the upper atmosphere (held in 1997). They conclude that this consensus conference was not a success. There was few input of the citizen panel during the discussion with experts. Experts addressed their selves mainly to other experts and did not go beyond their own field of expertise. To the citizen panel it seemed like there were no policy options; as a consequence they got frustrated and their trust in the experts decreased even more. The citizen panel got the impression that the experts did not want to find solutions. The citizen panel executed the consensus–finding process behind closed doors and without a facilitator. In trying to reach a consensus, the pressure had increased very much. The report of the citizen panel did not include policy options or concrete measures; responsibilities were shifted to policymakers. Media attention was not as big as expected, and not evenly distributed over time. Later on it appeared that the subject of ozone was soon not on the political agenda any more.

The U.S. consensus conference ‘Telecommunications and the Future of Democracy’ (1997) was evaluated by Guston (1999). Guston evaluated the consensus conference on 4 types of impacts: 1) actual impact, 2) impact on general thinking, 3) impact on training of knowledgeable personnel and 4) interaction with lay knowledge. He concludes that the consensus conference did not succeed in any of these impacts. He did find that there were “small–scale impacts on procedural and reflexive learning among elite participants [experts] and all kinds of learning among the panelists.” Media coverage was small, possibly also due to a snowstorm at the time of the conference. The citizens’ report was too broad and not timely. Furthermore, there was minimal interaction between experts and citizens.

In accordance with Guston (1999), Einsiedel & Eastlicks (2000) conclude about the Canadian consensus conference on food biotechnology that there were a number of indications that in policy circles, the consensus conference heightened sensitivity to and appreciation for deliberative processes of this nature. Furthermore, they conclude that in the Canadian consensus conference on food biotechnology frustrations emerged with regard to time constraints on the process, the “posturing” or nonresponse by some of the experts and the creation of an “us–them” mentality.

These examples show that theory and practice diverge; in practice the tool faces a multitude of difficulties, hampering the possible contributions to policy processes. These experiences can be used to learn about this tool and its points of particular attention.

List of experiences with consensus conferences:

**Argentina:** Genetically modified foods (2000); human genome project (2001).

**Australia:** Gene technology in the food chain (1999)

**Austria:** Ozone in the upper atmosphere (1997)

**Belgium:** Genetic testing (2003?)

**Canada:** Mandatory laptop computers in universities (1998 — pilot organized by students at McMaster University); McMaster's policy concerning online education (1999 — pilot organized at McMaster University); food biotechnology (Western Canada, 1999); municipal waste management (Hamilton City/Region, 2000)

**Denmark:** Gene technology in industry & agriculture (1987); food irradiation (1989); human genome mapping (1989); air pollution (1990); educational technology (1991); transgenic animals (1992); future of private automobiles (1993); infertility (1993); electronic identity cards (1994); information technology in transport (1994); integrated production in agriculture (1994); setting limits on chemicals in food & the environment (1995); gene therapy (1995); consumption & the environment (1997); teleworking (1997);

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citizens' food policy (1998); future of fishing (1998); genetically modified foods (1999); noise and technology (2000)

**France:** Genetically modified foods (1998)

**Germany:** Citizens' Conference on Genetic Testing, (November 23rd – 26th, 2001 at the Deutsches Hygiene–Museum Dresden)

**Israel:** Future of transportation (2000)

**Japan:** Gene therapy (1998); high information society (1999); genetically modified food (2000)

**Netherlands:** Genetically modified animals (1993); human genetics research (1995) ) (the consensus conference was in The Netherlands actually held under the name of “publiek debat” (public debate))

**New Zealand:** Plant biotechnology (1996); plant biotechnology 2 (May 1999); biotechnological pest control (Sept. 1999)

**Norway:** Genetically modified foods (1996); smart–house technology for nursing homes (2000)

**South Korea:** Safety & ethics of genetically modified foods (1998); cloning (Sept. 1999)

**Switzerland:** National electricity policy (1998—conducted in 3 languages with simultaneous translation); genetic engineering and food (June 1999); transplantation medicine (Nov. 2000)

**U.K.:** Genetically modified foods (1994); radioactive waste management (May 1999)

**U.S.A.:** Telecommunications & future of democracy (1997; Boston area pilot initiated by The Loka Institute); "Genetically Engineered Food (scheduled for February 2002)"

## 4.3 Combinations

There are no specific combinations or links with other tools. This tool does not need input from other tools, nor does it provide specific input for other tools.

The citizen panel's report is a very specific outcome, comparable to the report that is the outcome of a citizens' jury. With regard to the assessment of citizens' views, IA/SA focus groups might deliver comparable results.

## 4.4 Strengths and weaknesses

Strengths:

- The consensus conference may increase public awareness (dependent a.o. on media attention)
- It may lead to making better decisions, by enriching the process with relevant points of view. Or as Andersen & Jaeger (1999) state it: “The consensus conference may provide political and public debate and decision–making on new technology with dimensions and reasoning which were not taken into account previously”.
- Learning is probably also a very important impact of a consensus conference. The citizen panel can learn about the subject, and the experts and policymakers can learn about citizens' views.
- Another strength is that this tool actively involves citizens, who are normally not asked and who give a deliberate view on the topic. As a consequence the citizen panel may acquire self–confidence with regard to scientific and policy matters (Andersen & Jaeger, 1999).



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- From a democratic point of view, this tool may increase the legitimacy of the decision-making: It is an “opportunity for those with little power to obtain information and to be heard, and thus an opportunity for more democratic decision-making on the use and regulation of new technology” (Andersen & Jaeger, 1999).
- It may increase the accountability of decision-making, as participants get an inside view in the decision-making process and become co-responsible for the process and its outcomes.

### Weaknesses:

- In striving for a shared position on the topic, certain deviating insights/ points of view can get lost. (According to S. Joss (2000) there has to be a constant striving towards a shared position, although he stresses this doesn't mean that it's by any means necessary to reach a consensus).
- As for the impacts of the tool, it seems that there is little effect on policy. Evaluations are unfortunately scarce.
- The report of the citizen panel cannot be regarded as THE voice of the public. The selection of the citizen panel is not completely random and the sample is small; therefore the validity is low.
- The Belgian example illustrates that “the facilitation process confirms the image of the layperson with his or her many questions. The emphasis was on seeking answers and the expectation that expert knowledge could alleviate any concerns citizens may have” (Vandenabeele & Goorden, 2004). This characteristic is probably not unique for the Belgian situation.
- The focus of the facilitation process in this Belgian example was on cooperative skills and expert information; this hides an inability to deal with the type of argumentation that can be expected from citizens (Vandenabeele & Goorden, 2004). This corresponds to what we argued before about the coding of “lay” knowledge in experts' terms, leading possibly to the omission of specific valuable lay knowledge.
- There is answer-and-question type of interaction between experts and the citizens. Interaction between experts and citizens, in terms of working out differences together, (often) does not occur; this may result in sub-optimal outcomes.

The various strengths and weaknesses can come to expression in various stages of the policy making process. For an important part, the size and impact of the strengths and weaknesses are determined by the accurateness and the thoroughness of the way the tool is being deployed.

## 4.5 Further work

An essential pillar for further work is the question how the tool's link with decision-making and the policy process can be improved and what aims this tools should pursue. A point of particular interest for further work is how we can make use of the variance in methodology of this tool to create a tool-variant in which interaction between experts and citizens is more extensive, and in which more new ideas, arguments and points of view can be brought to the surface.

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