

# European research into sustainable development

Participatory approaches are growing, says **Jill Jäger**

A broad international agreement on a vision of sustainability has emerged. It is to foster a transition toward development paths that meet human needs, while preserving the Earth's life support systems and alleviating hunger and poverty. This should be achieved through forms of governing that are empowering and also sensitive to the needs of future generations.

The European Commission Directorate General for Research recently organised a conference in Brussels, 'Sustainable Development: A Challenge for European Research'.<sup>1</sup> It heard several good examples of the use of participatory approaches to engaging stakeholders in the search for pathways to sustainable development.

## Structural change and cities

It is clear that sustainable development goals cannot be achieved by small modifications of present-day practices. Major structural changes will be required. A prize-winning paper by Derk Loorbach and Niki Frantzeskaki<sup>2</sup> discussed how a participatory approach can be used to stimulate continuous structural changes in culture, structure and practices to bring about transitions to sustainable development. Stakeholder engagement is necessary both to explore the possibilities for such changes and to build up a network of actors to support the change processes. Loorbach and Frantzeskaki are currently testing this approach in the Netherlands. A further test in the area of waste management in Belgium was reported by Karel van Acker.<sup>3</sup>

Another prize-winner, J. David Tabara of the Autonomous University of Barcelona, focused on the need to develop a participatory approach to address persistent problems like climate change.<sup>4</sup>

In discussing urban issues, delegates emphasized the need for participatory approaches to build bridges between the research community and a wide range of decision-makers. In a session on sustainable cities, it was pointed out that the city of the future must be able to cope with climate change, population increases and increasing scarcity of resources such as water and energy. Stakeholder involvement during the planning and operation phase of sustainable urban water management, for example, was seen to be crucial. These discussions highlighted the benefits of using collaborative approaches to engage citizens and researchers in a dialogue about pathways to sustainable development in cities.

## Natural sciences too

It was very interesting to see that even projects that are strongly based in the natural sciences are beginning to recognize the value of engaging stakeholders. For example, the EPOCA (European Project on Ocean Acidification) project, funded by the European Commission, which was launched in June 2008, aims to advance the understanding of the biological, ecological, biogeochemical, and societal implications of ocean acidification. The EPOCA project has established what it calls a Reference User Group to examine in detail the types of data, analyses and products that will be most useful to managers, policy advisors, decision makers and politicians, the format and nature of key messages arising from the EPOCA research, and the dissemination procedures.

Scientific research is crucial to achieving sustainability goals, but a large gap persists between what the research community thinks it has to offer, on the one hand, and what society has demanded and supported, on the other. In particular, research has been strong in identifying complex problems of unsustainability, while society is increasingly asking for solutions. The engagement of stakeholders in the research process would help to bridge this gap through making the public and politicians more aware of the nature and magnitude of the challenges posed by transitions to sustainability. Participation also supports the finding of robust solutions for a more sustainable future. Partnerships with all major stakeholders will be necessary, including the private sector, the public health sector and civil society. Indigenous and traditional knowledge must also play a greater role in addressing sustainability challenges.

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1 See [www.ec.europa.eu/research/sd/conference/](http://www.ec.europa.eu/research/sd/conference/)

2 See <http://ec.europa.eu/research/sd/conference/2009/pdf/winning-papers.pdf>

3 See <http://tinyurl.com/lkohl7>

4 See <http://tinyurl.com/l2ugqz>



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# Communicating to change behaviour

Jonathon Porritt reflects on tone, trust and transparency

Our politicians face a huge challenge: understanding what it will take to produce a massive shift in the way UK citizens understand and act on climate change. Many people are still uncertain about the issue. Nor do they know whether what they're being exhorted to do will have any effect.

Tone, trust and transparency are the watchwords we need to use as the basis for seeking accelerated behaviour change.

## Tone

In attempting to mobilize the population to change its behaviour, tone is everything. There is a continuum of views, from James Lovelock at one end to Jeremy Clarkson at the other. Lovelock thinks we should relax because it's too late to do anything anyway. He sees global warming already set to bring about the end of human civilization as we know it. On the other hand, Jeremy Clarkson thinks we should relax because it's all being over-hyped and the planet is 'just fine'.

We don't want to disempower people through despair. We have to acknowledge the urgency, and the potentially apocalyptic consequences of not acting in the time available to us. But we have to do it in a way that persuades people there's a game in town.

Happily, there is a better tone in this debate now than there has been in previous science-based controversies, such as the GM debate. We hear far less of the 'deficit model' of science education, where 'experts' look upon each individual citizen as an ignoramus waiting to be filled by the knowledge scientists have to impart. There are still people who think that is the best way of doing it, but they are much less prominent in the climate change debate.

## Trust

It's impossible to persuade people to change their behaviour unless there are high levels of trust between the

persuaders and the persuadees. Take energy efficiency, for instance. Unfortunately, the government still relies on energy companies as their primary vehicles for persuading citizens to live more energy-efficient lives. But these same companies can only meet their obligations to shareholders by making increased sales of electricity or gas!

Surveys show that only a tiny percentage of consumers trust the energy companies to do other than make more money out of them – which is what they're charged to do, in terms of their basic fiduciary duties.

The government has not thought through the importance of trust as an effective part of advocating behaviour change. It needs to be much smarter about working with those parts of society (such as Non-Governmental Organisations and academics) where there are still high levels of trust.

## Transparency

We have to be prepared to shine light on murky areas of public policy which some people would like to put beyond the pale of rational discourse.

For example, the arch-taboo territory of economic growth. It seems a perfectly uncontroversial statement to say that the pursuit of consumption-driven economic growth, indefinitely into the future, for a global population of nine billion people, is literally impossible! But this in itself seems to be unacceptable to a lot of people.

The Sustainable Development Commission has just issued a new report under the title *Prosperity Without Growth?* (the Treasury was particularly keen that there should be

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a question mark in there!), and this has been very well received by anyone with an interest in this area – apart from the government itself!

Trying to close down on critical discussions about such key issues is unlikely to provide the kind of realistic, permissive environment in which citizens are empowered to start thinking about how different our lives are going to be in future. And that is an absolutely critical responsibility for all science communicators.

*This is a summary of the keynote address given by Jonathon Porritt to the British Science Association's Science Communication Conference*



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