

Participating in Change

: reviewing experiments in environmental change & public
debate at Interdependence Day 2007
www.interdependenceday.co.uk

People often think that there is little they can do about environmental problems, beyond exercising their purchasing powers at the supermarket checkout through buying so-called 'green' consumer goods. But there other, potentially more powerful, ways for people to effect change. They require us to get involved in what is called 'public participation', and many of us are increasingly doing so, in lots of new ways.

The 'Participating in Change' workshop at Interdependence Day 2007 was designed to explore innovative projects (*listed below or insert hyperlink?) with a remit to help address environmental problems and to increase public participation in confronting them. The workshop encouraged the Interdependence Day audience to critically evaluate these projects, each of which demonstrated a novel approach to public involvement in complex issues.

The workshop opened with an introduction to the theme of public participation. The Interdependence Day audience were then given the opportunity to discover what each of the projects did, and how their brand of public involvement might be beneficial. The format of the sessions also enabled the audience to explore the different challenges that each project faced.

The day demonstrated the wide variety of organisations working in the field of public involvement and environmental issues and gave a flavour of the creative ways of engaging the public which are being deployed. The organisations present were pleased to be able to actually engage with their 'audience' since many of the groups work 'virtually' over the web and rarely get a chance to meet those who support their causes or contribute to their efforts. The day also demonstrated how enthusiastic the public are for alternative and innovative ways to get involved in environmental issues.

Why Participate in Change?

'Public participation' is fast becoming a buzz phrase. However, its roots reach back into decades of thinking about how best to solve some of society's most pressing problems. Nowadays participation is increasingly associated with finding sustainable solutions to environmental concerns.

'Public participation' refers to the involvement of ordinary citizens in policy decisions. This is increasingly thought essential - not only because it may

improve the democratic credentials and quality of decisions, but also because it may help to prevent problems in implementing them. Participation is necessary, it is argued, so that we may scrutinise, debate and have some influence on the decisions that are finally reached. Some commentators go further, arguing that it is now impossible to govern effectively for sustainable development without a significant degree of public involvement.

These ideas now have so much resonance that we often hear talk of a 'stakeholder society' or a 'participative turn'. Such terms signify that participation doesn't refer to one single method of involvement in decision-making, where we, the public, merely influence policymakers in central government. Thinking on participation has developed considerably in recent years, so that today, it need not only happen in traditional arenas like formulation of government policy. We might also be asked our opinions from the comfort of an armchair e.g. by the media, or even over the web by non-governmental organisations. Our involvement might take the form of a simple questionnaire where we are asked to give our views: alternatively we may be asked to discuss and deliberate difficult issues in a citizens jury. Unlike simple form filling, this kind of participation, through deliberation, may actually influence our own opinions in the process.

Sometimes we may participate in a policy decision and never know the outcome of our efforts. On the other hand, as a participating 'stakeholder' we may gain membership of a group and acquire the powers to see our opinions acted upon.

High levels of participation are likely to develop consciousness amongst the people involved, and a sense of belonging to 'the public'. Effectively, then, 'the public' is being *created* by meaningful participation. It is effectively brought into being when individuals are actively invited to play a part. 'Affected publics', may then be prompted to take action on an issue like climate change.

Participation has no doubt produced many environmental successes. But this need not always be the case. We sometimes hear of unilateral decisions made by either governments or chief executives, citing 'public consultation' as a justification of outcomes that had already been intended.

In many circles, public involvement is seen as unquestionably beneficial both for citizens and the environment, and many resources are spent trying to galvanise participation for green ends. But even well meaning consultation may suffer from inefficiencies, or produce results that are not necessarily environmentally benign. So perhaps now is the time to pause and reflect critically on participatory practices, hopefully building on the more successful projects that were represented at Interdependence Day 2007.

The projects hosted at Interdependence Day 2007:

The Nag	The Nag is “world-saving-made-simple. It's a ‘cheeky website that helps people do one thing a month to make their lifestyles more sustainable, without even leaving their chairs. The Nag's map tracks what everyone's up to and shows the collective impact in real time”. They are currently short listed for the Best Website category of the Green Awards.	www.thenag.net
Climate Outreach & Information Network	COIN aims at “peer-to-peer communication and engagement about climate change”.	http://coinet.org.uk
Climate Prediction	Climateprediction.net is the “largest experiment to try and produce a forecast of the climate in the 21st century. To do this, we need people around the world to give us time on their computers - time when they have their computers switched on, but are not using them to their full capacity”.	http://www.climateprediction.net
Climate Xchange.	ClimateXChange wants to “be the Buzz, from village communities to venture capitalists; from snakes and ladders to knickers on the line; from climate doom to climate woop”!	http://climatex.org
Climate talk	Climate talk is a “kit of cards which people can use to hold rich conversations about the issues raised for them by climate change. It has been used by schools to help children's understanding to grow, by councils to develop strategy, and communities to kick-start action groups”.	www.climatespace.org
Acton CO2 Roadshow - DEFRA	Defra's Act on CO2 regional Roadshow is designed to “raise awareness of the role that individuals play in contributing to carbon emissions and encourage behaviour change in order to help reduce CO2. The roadshow will be inviting people to trial the Government's new Act on CO2 calculator and find out simple ways to reduce their own carbon footprint”.	www.direct.gov.uk/en/environmentandgreenerliving/actonco2/DG_067197
Red Redemption games	The Red Redemption Games team designs “fun computer games based on the real science of climate change. Take on the hot seat as president of Europe for 100 years in ‘Climate Challenge’ our climate change strategy game for adults, or see if you can tackle personal transport or national energy solutions in ‘Operation: Climate Control’ a multi-player climate change game for GCSE students, or have a go at cutting waste in the office with ‘Trouble Shooter!’ a short fun office sustainability arcade game”.	www.red-redemption.com
Oneclimate	Oneclimate is a space to join friends around the	www.oneclimate.net

	world to tackle climate change. They say 'There's a chance to save our world if we act together'	
Living Geography	Living Geography "has adopted a 'message' of Living Geography to impress on teachers, and others, that students can be engaged in learning that uses and develops their understanding and skills in the context of environmental change".	www.geography.org.uk/apg
Young People's Geography Project	The Young Peoples' Geographies Project is "exploring ways in which geography teachers can use the lived experiences of young people to empower learners to think geographically about environmental change. Over the last year the Geographical Association has been exploring such geographies. We have established conversations between young people, academic geographers, geography teachers and geography teacher educators. These are informing a dynamic process of curriculum construction ('curriculum making') in schools".	www.geography.org.uk/apg
Mutation Workshop	The Mutation workshop is "inspired by the many different connections through which people link to their environment. Mutable Matter is a process of mutual learning and discovery where ideas are exchanged through symbolic experimentation".	http://mutablematter.wordpress.com
Otesha	The Otesha Project is "building a global community of people who take sustainable living personally. Our goals? To tackle big issues in creative ways, encourage practical environmental actions, and have a bit of fun at the same time. You're likely to find us cycle touring, performing, culture jamming, community-building, supporting new projects, and just generally shaking things up".	http://www.otesha.ca
Ban the Bulb	The Ban The Bulb campaign has made the case for incandescent light bulbs to be phased out and banned since Feb 2005. Through the careful use of the internet and the media this campaign has made an evidence-based case to the public, proposed practical changes to manufacturers and retailers and given governments (incl. Australia, Canada, UK and the EU) a quick and effective win-win solution to some of their biggest energy and climate change problems.	http://www.banthebulb.co.uk
Cheat neutral	"From the high street to the Houses of Parliament", cheatneutral.com "sparks an important debate about the inadequacies of carbon offsetting"	http://www.cheatneutral.com