

POLICY MAKERS VERSUS PEOPLE

A Novel Idea: Asking Citizens What They Think about Climate Change

By Netra Chhetri and Gary M. Grossman

Climate change has become a major environmental issue of the twenty-first century, a threat in which humans are implicated both as perpetrators and as victims. It is a complex issue requiring thorough study. The political decisions being taken in response to climate change will affect everything from global economic development to the lifestyles and livelihoods of ordinary citizens everywhere—in short, the future of the planet and its inhabitants.

Yet, much of the climate change policy debate is limited to an elite set of people—politicians, scientists, and special interest groups. For the general public, questions and debates regarding climate change are framed as just too complex and technical. Ordinary citizens supposedly find it difficult to understand the aspects of climate change and the politics surrounding the issue. These citizens, though, will have to live with the consequences of climate change policy.

The distance between citizens and policy makers on the issue of climate change is ever widening. There must be a goal to close this gap and enable ordinary people to feel they have some stake in climate change policy. Failure to do so will make it less likely that citizens will eventually buy into behavior changes that policy to address climate change may entail. In the case of climate change, democracy is not merely the preferred approach on principle; it is a pragmatic necessity if policy is to achieve results.

World Wide Views on Global Warming, or WWViews, was a project aimed at giving a broad sample of citizens from across the world the opportunity to engage in global climate policy debates. Initiated by the Danish Board of Technology, a group overseen by Denmark's Ministry of Science, Technology, and Development, WWViews organized discussion groups on a single day in September 2009 in thirty-eight countries across six continents. In the first global citizen

▷ Chinese farmer in a dry riverbed, Luliang County, Yunnan, March 25, 2010.
CHINATOPIX/Associated Press



consultation of its kind, the participants debated and voted on recommendations for policy makers on issues already on the agenda at the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) summit in Copenhagen, also known as COP15, which took place in December 2009.

Citizen forums became a part of the formal policy process in the United States in the 1970s as one of the requirements of the National Environmental Policy Act. Citizen forums have been conducted in many countries throughout the world on such topics as genetically modified food, nanotechnology, electronic surveillance, and, of course, climate change.

WWViews proved to be a project with ambitions not only to promote greater citizen awareness of climate change but also to channel citizen views toward policy makers with the intention of influencing policy decisions. WWViews demonstrated that ordinary citizens can indeed comprehend the complexity of the climate change issue and make intelligent contributions to the debate. The project brought together a diverse set of forty-four regional and national partners ranging from some with significant experience in organizing deliberative processes to others with none. Some four thousand citizens participated at forty-four individual sites, and spent the day together deliberating and voting on twelve questions in four thematic areas—climate change consequences, long-term climate goals, greenhouse gas emissions (GHGs), and technology—then formulating concrete recommendations for COP15 delegates.

Overall, the WWViews participants concluded that climate change is a serious issue that affects everyone, that the negative effects of climate change are being exacerbated by a lack of action, and that immediate steps are now required to address climate change. According to the organizers, the WWViews on Global Warming produced nine clear policy recommendations to address climate change:

- Make a deal at COP15.
- Keep any temperature increase below 2 degrees.
- Annex 1 countries [thirty-seven industrialized nations including the U.S.] should reduce emissions by 25–40 percent or more by 2020.
- Fast-growing economies should also reduce emissions by 2020.
- Low-income developing countries should limit emissions.
- Give high priority to an international financial mechanism.
- Punish non-complying countries.
- Make technology available to all.
- Strengthen or supplement international institutions.

Power to the People

WWViews provided a distinctive form of public engagement, combining the two key values of democratic governance: inclusiveness, or equal consideration of everyone's preferences; and deliberation, a process of discussion in which people weigh competing arguments based on their merits. The idea was to create an atmosphere of mutual respect in which the participants avoided polarization or the distorting influence of special interests and instead took into account their legitimate differences of opinion.

To be better equipped for the discussions, participants received briefing materials in advance that were based on the Fourth Assessment Report of the UN Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change. The design of WWViews called for approximately one hundred citizens at each site to be seated at tables of five to eight people with a facilitator trained to ensure that everyone got involved. After watching short information videos covering a theme for discussion, the participants then engaged in a facilitated dialogue, which also gave them time to reflect. Each of the four thematic sessions concluded with citizens casting their votes anonymously on two to four questions.

After concluding the thematic sessions, a final session was held at which citizens at each table wrote in their own words what they believed to be the most important recommendation to pass on to COP15 delegates. These were written on flip charts and taped to walls so that everybody could read the recommendations from each table before submitting individual ballots to select a prioritized list of recommendations. The reporting of the results took place instantaneously on the website of the project (www.wwviews.org), so that anyone with Internet access could—and still can—compare answers to the various questions across countries and regions, as well as political and economic groupings.

The participants were everyday citizens who did not have a direct stake in climate change. However, they all have an indirect stake as community members and world citizens who will have to live with the consequences of policies adopted by their political representatives. Invariably, WWViews enabled the airing of the wisdom of ordinary people into discussions. In some cases, the gatherings stimulated a passion among participants to actively engage others on climate change, and other issues.

WWViews provided a space for participants to gain a greater understanding of other viewpoints as well as generally expanding their awareness or deepening their knowledge about climate change. While some participants seemed better informed at the outset, each participant commonly found his or her voice during the process. Some realized that they *had* held an opinion on something that they had not been previously aware of while others perhaps strengthened their opinion of an issue through this engagement. In Phoenix, we observed that for some, the topic of global

warming was new, while for others it was familiar. There were some in the group who already followed the politics of climate change very closely.

The WWViews process sought to arrive at agreement through thoughtful discussion and facilitators worked with participants to discover common ground. The idea was that a consensus should be built by people whose concern is the general good of policies likely to be acceptable within society and for the good of society as a whole. Ideally, such a consensus would place a burden on policy makers to justify policies that fall outside the consensus and thereby guide science and technology policy along paths that enjoy broad support.

From Phoenix to Cairo

We analyzed the results of the WWViews gathering in Phoenix using data from surveys taken both before (ninety-two respondents) and after (eighty-eight respondents) the event. On the question of interest in the subject of climate change, nearly 80 percent of the participants expressed a strong interest in learning about the topic. However, only a small minority felt well informed about it, despite the fact that the overwhelming majority of the participants underlined the importance of the subject for everyday life and within scientific studies. It is interesting to note that approximately 90 percent of the participants stated that they want to be involved in decision-making on climate change, but only about 60 percent expressed interest in taking part in deliberation processes.

Prior to the WWViews forum in Phoenix, a clear majority of 64 percent of the participants agreed that climate change already has had a negative impact on the quality of their life. This figure jumped to 74 percent following the deliberations. The vast majority of participants were aware of the seriousness of the climate change problem. For example, more than 80 percent believed that climate change will certainly reduce the quality of life for future generations. In the pre-event survey, only 62 percent expressed confidence in technology to solve the climate change problem. This figure increased to 81 percent in the survey taken afterwards.

Only 33 percent of participants in the first survey were willing to accept a significant reduction in income and lifestyle comfort for the sake of policies tackling climate change. That figure increased to 44 percent afterwards. Put in other words, a full majority of these Arizonans were not ready to give up their lifestyle in order to help address threats posed by climate change. Fewer than 30 percent of the Arizonans agreed that the U.S. is a world leader in reducing energy use to mitigate negative impacts on climate. In the pre-event survey, 62 percent of participants in Arizona showed confidence in international agreements on CO₂ reductions to combat global warming. The degree of confidence soared to 85 percent after the deliberation. A sizable majority of the

Arizonans, 70 percent, rejected the notion that environmentalists have exaggerated the threats posed by climate change. And nine out of ten believe that citizen action will be crucial in persuading national leaders to combat global warming.

Looking at the global results, it is remarkable how consistently citizens across different demographic groups and geographic regions agree on the urgent need for unified and strong policy to address climate change. Citizens across the globe want to keep any temperature increase below 2 degrees Celsius; to set carbon reduction targets not only for industrialized countries but also for fast-growing economies and low-income countries; to give priority to the creation of international financial mechanisms and technology transfer programs; to strengthen international institutions and introduce both rewards and punishments for countries to reach their carbon emission goals. Nearly half of all the participants want to limit future temperature increase to current temperature levels, or even to decrease to pre-industrial levels. Countries projected to be hit hard by the impact of climate change showed the highest level of support for a return to pre-industrial temperature levels.

Approximately 74 percent of the 341 participants in the U.S. (Atlanta, Boston, Denver, Los Angeles, and Phoenix) reported being “very concerned” about global warming. This is in sharp contrast with recent public opinion polls in the United States indicating somewhat diminishing popular concern with climate change. A striking nine in ten Americans who took part in WWViews—as well as nine out of ten citizens in the other thirty-seven countries taking part—agreed that a new climate deal during COP15 was a matter of urgency.

Approximately 90 percent of Americans who participated in the deliberations agreed to reduce greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions 25–40 percent (or more) below 1990 levels by 2020. (This is the emissions target that the Obama administration is seeking.) Additionally, 48 percent of the four thousand WWViews participants want nations that fail to meet their obligations under a new climate deal to be severely penalized. More than half of the citizens who participated in WWViews voted that the price of fossil fuels should be increased as a means of encouraging alternatives to carbon-emitting energy sources.

The response of the citizen forum in Egypt is of special interest given how it differs from the global norm. For example, across all the WWViews forums 28 percent of the citizens said they knew a lot about climate change and its consequences before joining the project (and 53 percent said they knew something). In Egypt, however, a higher number, 49 percent, said they knew a lot (while 24 percent said they knew some). When asked the extent of their concerns about climate change, at the global level 62 percent said that they were “very concerned” about the possible impacts. In Egypt, this number reached 85 percent of participating citizens.

Egyptians also expressed a much higher degree of concern towards climate change than the citizens in much of the rest of the world, including the U.S. and Western Europe. Ninety-four percent of the Egyptians expressed a sense of urgency for a deal at COP15, whereas the global average on this question was 90 percent. When asked about whether the politicians in their country should give high priority to joining a new climate deal, 83 percent of Egyptians answered yes—this was prior to the January 25, 2011 revolution that toppled the Hosni Mubarak regime—while the global average was 91 percent. Compared to global and U.S. averages, Egyptians expressed a lower level of confidence in their politicians.

Finally, the results in Egypt may be indicative of heightened climate change concerns in the developing world for, in many cases, such countries are the most vulnerable to the potential negative consequences of climate change. In the survey, 39 percent of Egyptians sought a return to pre-industrial levels of GHGs; only Malawi, at 48 percent, voiced stronger sentiment on the question.

Challenging the Elites

The WWViews results represent a tangible airing of citizen voices that has been largely absent from policy-making arenas. The organizers of WWViews believe that the deliberations provided valuable insight into the views of ordinary people in a way that provides credence to the policy process by expanding the debate beyond the elites represented by politicians, scientists, and special interests.

It is not easy to quantify how it may have actually influenced policy making, but the WWViews organizers were disappointed that the project did not have a greater immediate impact. Nine out of ten WWViews participants urged their countries' delegations to reach a new, binding climate change agreement at COP15. But that did not occur.

There is no doubt, however, that WWViews did contribute to raising awareness about climate change—certainly among the participants themselves but also in the wider communities that heard about the forums through local news coverage. Certainly politicians took notice of the events. In the Phoenix area, U.S. Representative Harry Mitchell, an Arizona Democrat, made welcoming remarks at the WWViews forum held at Arizona State University. “What’s important about this event is community engagement,” Mitchell said. “Citizen participation and input is important to any public policy change. If you truly expect it to work, you’ve got to have citizen participation.”

And that may be the most important lesson policy makers should take from the WWViews project.

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