

# CITIZENS' ACTIVE PARTICIPATION IN EUROPEAN RESEARCH



# VOICES: A MILESTONE IN EU PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT

"Citizens' active participation in research and innovation is becoming a strong priority in Europe, as confirmed by the EU Framework Programme for Research and Innovation Horizon 2020. Today more than ever, scientific and technological solutions need a societal uptake. Participation empowers citizens and strengthens science governance.

The ground-breaking VOICES process was the first in-depth consultation of people living in every country of the EU on a scientific topic. The methodology used, 3-hour focus groups, resulted in a deep, unique understanding of citizens' views. Citizens around Europe were delighted by the clear commitment of the European Commission to make use of their VOICES to influence research priorities.

VOICES has proved to be a successful model of democratic science governance. It produced an innovative and replicable participatory process, orienting research, innovation and policy making more strongly towards societal needs. VOICES represents a milestone in Responsible Research and Innovation (RRI), fostering new multi-stakeholder participatory activities in the future."

**Marzia Mazzonetto**

VOICES Coordinator

## WHAT IS EU RESEARCH?

To drive our economy, we need to be innovative. That's why the European Union supports European researchers, by spending over €10 billion per year across the EU on research and innovation.

In recent years, the EU has been supporting the involvement of different societal actors: researchers; but also citizens, policy makers, CSOs, etc.; in research and innovation processes, in order to better align the outcomes of scientific research to the expectations of European citizens. This approach is known as Responsible Research and Innovation (RRI). Engaging multiple stakeholders in research and innovation (R&I) leads to more socially responsive processes and outcomes, as well as encourages shared responsibilities for R&I agendas.

## WHY IS MY VOICE SO IMPORTANT?

RRI means understanding society's expectations as well as possible implications of scientific advancements. New technologies need to be as useful to society as possible. That's why researchers and innovators should ensure their work is in line with people's needs and ethical values. In the past, surveys have given us a hint about European citizens' opinions and views. Nevertheless, by engaging participants in face-to-face conversations, the VOICES consultation has successfully tested an innovative, in-depth way of finding out how people really feel about research and innovation. It has also allowed them to bring about their own ideas.

In the future, similar participatory processes will be used to consult the public across the EU on topics from nanotechnology to climate change. Look out for future opportunities to participate in your country and let the EU hear your views on research. For example, the European Commission's website Your Voice in Europe opens up a wide variety of tools for you to play an active role in the European policymaking process, from consultations on EU policies to online chats with Europe's leaders.

*"The European Commission's motivation was to find an innovative and effective way of giving the general public a say on science and technology issues affecting our lives and shaping our future". Máire Geoghegan-Quinn, EU Commissioner for Research and Innovation, March 2014*

## WHAT ROLE DO SCIENCE CENTRES AND SCIENCE MUSEUMS PLAY?

Science centres and museums not only play an important role in informal science education, but are also engaged in initiatives which impact local and European policy making. They are spaces where people can engage in and debate complex and controversial issues in science. Science centres equip adults, teenagers and children with the tools to become informed, engaged and responsible citizens. These spaces bring the public together to share opinions with researchers, policymakers and other key players in research and innovation. As well as the latest exhibitions and science shows, many organise debates, workshops and special activities where you can get to grips with real research and make a difference.

*"Each one of us expressed opinions without feeling judged. Comparing notes with other people is always a good thing - useful to us and to others. I hope it will be useful."* - VOICES focus group participant  
Naples, Italy,  
March 2013

## WHAT WAS SO SPECIAL ABOUT THE VOICES PROJECT?

### VOICES in numbers

992 European citizens

350 ideas

100 focus groups

27 EU countries

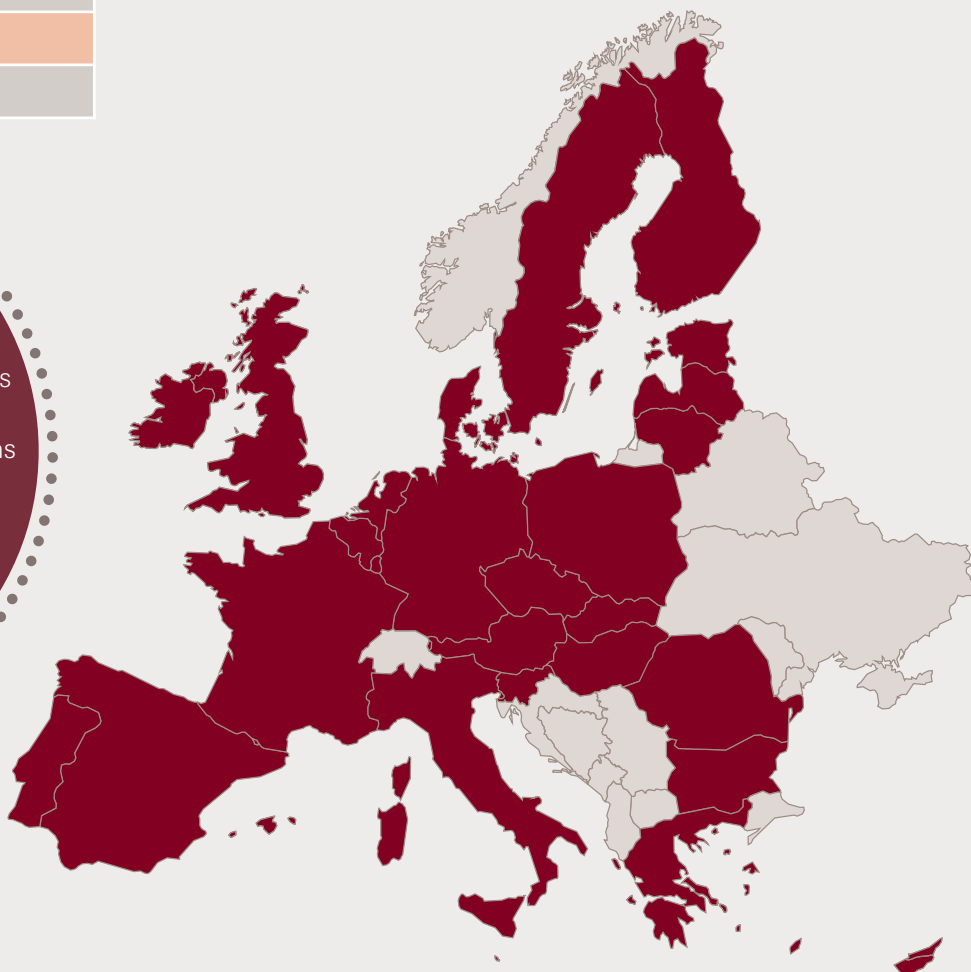
33 locations

557 EU municipalities

22 external advisors

Through VOICES, citizens from 27 EU countries had the concrete possibility to contribute with their ideas to the definition of strategic priorities for research in the EU in the field of waste management. The VOICES participatory exercise provided a deep and unique understanding of public opinion on the topic of urban waste, showing that in many areas citizens do have significant knowledge of the challenges facing waste disposal in Europe. It has also highlighted some issues which would allow for real social innovations, greater public engagement and new business opportunities.

Every year, the average citizen in the EU throws away half a tonne of household rubbish. The EU funds research and innovation which aims at producing less waste and even use our rubbish as a resource. New innovations could completely change the way we think about waste. By using waste as a resource, we can work towards the concept of a 'zero waste society'.



## WHAT WERE VOICES FOCUS GROUPS LIKE?

We invited European citizens from a range of ages and backgrounds to focus groups in 27 countries of the European Union. Each group of ten people met in a science centre or museum. They were there for an in-depth discussion about urban waste as a resource. A moderator from the science centre or museum introduced the topic and guided the group through four simple exercises, in which they discussed face-to-face. The exercises allowed them to engage with the chosen topic, relate it to their everyday lives, identify their concerns and propose solutions as a group. The conversations brought out a huge range of opinions. It was impressive to see how engaged people felt with the topic, putting forward hundreds of ideas, from the creative and inspiring to the serious and urgent. Each focus group lasted three hours and was completely transcribed, word-for-word, and translated into English.

Focus groups are a very important element of VOICES. This methodology allowed for flexibility as well as uniformity, and was very much enjoyed by participants and moderators.

- **Flexibility:** the VOICES methodology was successfully implemented in a range of cultures and contexts, across 27 EU member states, and can also be adapted for use at national and local levels, and with a range of policy topics.
- **Structure:** the VOICES focus groups worked on four exercises, which engaged the participants on the relevant topics, drawing out collective opinions and ideas in a carefully facilitated face-to-face process.
- **Expertise:** 22 external experts from a variety of backgrounds were involved in validating the methodology, devised by a highly experienced academic team at the VU University Amsterdam's Athena Institute.

The methodology is available in detail on the VOICES website, designed for you to adapt and use in your own consultation processes: [www.voicesforinnovation.eu](http://www.voicesforinnovation.eu)

## WHAT HAPPENED WITH THE RESULTS OF VOICES?

The outcomes of the focus groups were analysed by researchers, who first summarised the priorities for each country, and then compared these results on a European level. The reports produced were used by the European Commission to draft some of the calls for research proposals under the new Horizon 2020 Framework Programme for Research and Innovation. This means that the VOICES outcomes have made a significant contribution to the research priorities of scientists in Europe working in the area of 'Waste: A Resource to Recycle, Reuse and Recover Raw Materials', which will benefit from EU financial contribution of approximately €116 million in 2014-2015. Researchers, policymakers, science communicators and civil society organizations are also looking at VOICES results to find inspiration for socially relevant propositions and innovations.



# WHAT DID VOICES TELL US ABOUT URBAN WASTE AS A RESOURCE IN EUROPE?

The following results came up from the VOICES consultation. This is the collective opinion of 992 citizens from across all 27 European Union countries.

Some results confirmed that EU research is on the right track. Other results suggested new priorities that European scientists need to integrate.



## VOICES OUTCOMES IN LINE WITH CURRENT EU RESEARCH PRIORITIES

- Citizens want less packaging, and more efficient packaging materials. They want to see 100% biodegradable packaging, and plastics that can be fully recycled without loss of quality.
- They want urban waste to be easier to recycle and reuse, in more efficient ways.
- They want manufacturers to be regulated more heavily, taking responsibility for the lifespan and recycling of their products, and ending planned obsolescence.
- Citizens ask for more recycling points at convenient locations.
- They want incineration plants to be used as much as possible to produce heat and energy for the local communities.

## VOICES SUGGESTIONS OF INNOVATIVE WAYS TO STRENGTHEN EU RESEARCH

- European citizens feel convenience in the household is crucial. This is a part of waste management often neglected by research. They ask for devices to facilitate sorting and compacting in the home ("smart bins"), or technology which allows waste to be used as a resource in the household.
- Citizens want incentives to separate their waste. This can be done through deposit systems and reward schemes.
- Education and communication are crucial. Citizens are largely unaware of what happens to their waste, and would feel more engaged in the process if knowledge was more widespread.
- Technology can be a motivation to recycle in itself. Citizens feel that systems using chips, electronic tags and apps can help to empower people in the recycling process.



## HOW CAN I USE VOICES OUTCOMES?

VOICES outcomes are intended to be used by many types of stakeholders, for a range of purposes.

**Policy:** *"VOICES shows the determination of the European Commission to give European citizens the opportunity to have their say on societal challenges in the new Framework Programme for Research and Innovation, Horizon 2020."*  
Gilles Laroche, DG Research and Innovation, European Commission

**Advocacy:** *"Municipalities are always looking for methods and systems through which to manage waste more sustainably, with the interests of citizens in mind. For them, consultations such as VOICES offer an excellent opportunity to promote local issues at EU level, but also to better understand citizen expectations of their municipality in terms of information on their local waste management system and its implementation."* Vanya Veras, Secretary General, MWE (Municipal Waste Europe)

**Education and Outreach:** *"VOICES provides science centres an opportunity to learn the visitors' needs. Through this kind of consultations we can much better understand the needs of our visitors and much better develop ways to address them."* Robert Firmhofer, Director, Copernicus Science Centre, Warsaw, Poland

**Research:** *"It is clear that convenience in households is, from a citizen's point of view, one of the most important issues, and hence absolutely justified to talk about. To a certain extent the increase of convenience by new waste technologies may therefore also be a good way to make people support modern waste management."* Matthias Rapf, Institute of Sanitary Engineering, Water Quality and Waste Management Group Resources Management and Industrial Wastes (RIK), Stuttgart University, Germany.

**Public Engagement:** *"I wouldn't have expected the European Commission to take my opinions into account like this. I'm proud that my voice helped shape the way European researchers work on urban waste."* Paco Francisco, VOICES focus group participant, Granada, Spain

All the project outcomes are available at [www.voicesforinnovation.eu](http://www.voicesforinnovation.eu). There, you can consult any of the 27 country reports to find out the detailed results for your country, as well as the overall EU report to gain a European perspective on the results.



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