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Author: Mrs. Nathalie Meusy
European Space Agency (ESA), France

CITIZENS' DEBATE: A NEW WAY FOR ENGAGING THE GENERAL PUBLIC

Abstract

Recently ESA organised the very first Citizens' debate on space for Europe. It was the first informed debate between a space agency and its main stakeholders: the tax-payers, the citizens. This debate was the implementation of the will of ESA's newly elected Director General, Jan Woerner, to open up his agency and more generally space to the general public. The debate was conceived and organised on the model of the Citizens' debate at planetary scale held in 2015 for preparing the COP21 (Paris Conference on Climate Change) which gathered 10.000 citizens in 76 countries on the same day (6 June 2015) for discussing and answering 30 questions on climate and energy. The results were communicated to the negotiators. Regarding ESA, the Citizens' debate was conceived to get from citizens, elements of information and of inspiration for drawing up the future of space strategy for Europe. In terms of governance, this debate although being an illustration of participatory democracy was not meant to interfere with the institutional decision making process of ESA but to nurture and to support it. This debate was also a way to lend an ear to stakeholders as a matter of responsibility, accountability and respect towards them, and to collect their views, ideas, concerns and even dreams about space issues. 2000 participants dedicated a whole day to gather and discuss on space issues after having been given information through magazines and videos. The citizens subsequently answered a questionnaire comprising both closed and opened questions. They also lived and appreciated a creative session giving them the opportunity to build up a space mission for 2036. With this debate we realised in particular that citizens thought that they had no access to space thinking it was a matter for specialists, experts or policy makers although they actually had access to space without even knowing it. The presentation will focus on how this debate was created from scratch to arrive to a surprising event held in all ESA 22 Member-States on 10 September 2016 and to elaborate on the way the debate results have been and can be exploited.