

General Introduction

To accompany the PEN-REF WP3

Country Reports:

- 1. *Testing Focus Groups as a Means of Citizen Participation: The Austrian Country Report*, presented by IIASA;**
- 2. *Citizen deliberation on pension reform in France: Small group method and results*, presented by Institut SYMLOG de France;**
- 3. *The Italian Country Report*, presented by IriDiSS;**
- 4. *Public participation and the pension system: The case of Poland*, presented by PONT-INFO Ltd.**

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1 Aims of the PEN-REF Research and Articulation of Tasks

The European Commission-sponsored research contract PEN-REF¹ aims to provide experience with **public involvement** in the field of policy reform—a practicum missing in the field of pension and more generally welfare reform. PEN-REF tested **focus groups** as a means for more direct participation by the citizenry in the pension reform process.

Focus group consultations in conjunction with a series of expert interviews are used as a method for *identifying and analysing those factors that are necessary for re-shaping welfare systems and rendering them capable for adjustment* against the structural and demographic challenges faced in EU and Accession countries.

In Work Package (WP) 3, PEN-REF tested focus groups as a means of:

- a) **Policy deliberation** (to what extent can focus groups help policy formulation?)
- b) **Decision support** (to what extent can focus groups provide useful information about pension reform?)
- c) **Citizen participation** (to what extent can methods such as focus groups provide effective means for increased citizen participation in welfare reform issues?).

The focus group research conducted for PEN-REF in four countries (Austria, France, Italy, Poland) therefore collected information both about the *content of citizen views* of pension reform, and, on the *practicalities of involving citizens* in such deliberation.

The four Country Reports assembled here give detailed insight into each of these levels of interest. **The present introduction briefly highlights a few commonalities or differences in the conduct of the WP3 research by each country team.**

PEN-REF WP4, with a separate deliverable, will integrate the findings of these WP3 focus group reports with those of the textual analysis and expert interviews reported under WP2. It will suggest guidelines for policy-makers for promoting citizen participation in social policy formulation.

2 Why Use Focus Groups?

“Focus groups”, or focussed group interviews, are a qualitative research methodology that frequently has been used in the social sciences. Small discussion groups are composed. Participants are selected on the basis of characteristics or shared interests that may allow

¹ PEN-REF: *Public Participation and the Pension Policy Process: The Citizen and Pension Reform*. HPSE-CT-1999-00023. Coordinated by S. Ney (ICCR, Vienna) with research partners at ICCR (Au), SERRL (UK), Institut Symlog de France (F), IIASA (Au), IRiDiSS (It), LOS (No), PONT INFO Ltd. (Po).

them to give information pertinent to the research question. The group discussion, with its trading of opinions and development of debate, allows researchers to access a rich vision of how people grasp and regard complex topics.

“The key advantage of a focus group meeting is that it provides valuable information about how people talk about the subject of research and how their opinions form when their views are confronted with views expressed by others,” note the Polish team.

One of the underlying concepts of interest to the PEN-REF researchers was that of *fairness*. What models of fairness would the FG participants apply, implicitly or explicitly, to their analysis of the pension problem? Such content, like other social value positions, can be accessed in the discussion format of a focussed group interview.

Focus group (**FG**) research differs from semi-quantitative research, e.g. public opinion surveys, in that it is difficult to evaluate how representative the FG findings may be in regard to general public attitudes. However, researchers in some contexts prefer to trade away a representative sample of answers to succinct, pre-determined questions, in favour of gaining detailed elaborations of content and meanings as they are reported or developed in a group discussion. The selection of FG participants for the discussion of a societal topic like pension reform may appropriately target *variability* rather than national representativeness—attempting to mirror the complexity of social composition rather than reproduce it in a statistically valid miniature.

The logic behind sampling for variety is expressed by the Italian team:

“We assumed that each member of the FG brought into the discussion *an idea of fairness reflecting his or her life experiences*. The approach chosen for the composition of the FG was to compare individuals with *different* life experiences and an average level of education—recognizing that their individual positions in all likelihood did not represent a 360° view of fairness nor of the pension problem.”

As the Polish partner writes, researchers assumed that the view and assessment of the pension system by the experts, opinion leaders, and representatives of influential groups consulted in WP2

“may differ radically from the opinions of ‘ordinary people’ or ‘ordinary citizens’, which means that the picture of the system that follows from their statements may be a distorted, incomplete picture. That is also why we concentrated (in WP3) on comprehending how citizens who are directly affected by the changes to the pension system perceive the entire process of change in this system and what they feel about the solutions which may make this system operate efficiently and fairly”.

Focus groups can also be given a structured decision task in order to observe the process of deliberation and to learn what kind of compromise may be reached. The PEN-REF research thus developed and deepened a current governance trend towards seeking *participative formats* to associate citizens in policy decision-making. Other experiences with focus groups show that citizens can arrive at reasonable and informed judgments on complex policy issues if they have the opportunity to share an in-depth debate and if they are provided with relevant information in a suitable format (Kasemir *et al.* 1997).

The PEN-REF focus groups were composed of citizens or residents who met in the presence of a trained moderator to discuss the pension reform issue. Data were to be obtained on focus group participants' own representations of the pension issue, the values they expect to see protected by social welfare systems, and proposals for reform. The focus groups were expected to demonstrate to what extent the participants can understand and build upon expert assessments that show the future financial situation of the pension system and the incidence of the burdens and benefits on present cohorts and future generations.

3 Composition and Organization of the Groups

A phase of methodological development determined the most appropriate recruitment criteria and format for the PEN-REF focus groups in each of the four countries. Findings from PEN-REF WP2 (textual analysis and expert interviews) and FG pilot efforts by each team were subject to detailed consideration by the consortium. Rather than seeking to standardize all aspects, it was found that allowing each team to develop a specific approach would best serve the research objectives and provide a broader range of experience.

Each country developed criteria to guide FG organization and recruitment of participants. In general, eight participants were sought to form one discussion group; this group would meet over the course of days or weeks for up to six consecutive sessions, each lasting from two to six hours (according to country; longer series corresponded to shorter sessions). Then a new focus group would be formed and in turn complete a new series of sessions. From two to five series (including short pilot attempts) were held in each country. Participants received a modest compensation.

In total, the PEN-REF FG research mobilized some 94 citizen-participants in 12 separate focus groups, meeting over the course of 41 sessions for up to 160 hours.

The groups were conducted over the course of the year 2001.

In Austria, two groups were organized on the distinct themes of "sex-specific problems in pension reform" and "responsibility in an aging society". Group composition then targeted the greatest possible variety in terms of age, occupation, social status, and political orientation, with an eye to reflecting the variety of Austrian experience; gender was balanced. A pre-selection screened for candidates who had a dominant personal interest in pension reform, a basic knowledge of the subject, and a comprehensible form of expression.

In France, two overall group profiles were sought, reflecting broad socio-territorial differences in the population. Each group would follow the same discussion program. The first group targeted a "rural/provincial" profile, and was convened in the region of Orleans, a provincial capital. The group included both rural and small-urban residents, relatively similar in age (approaching retirement). The second group targeted a "large metropolis" profile; participants were drawn from the city of Paris and a number of its suburbs. This second group varied more in age and purposefully was younger on average. Overall, a good range of political viewpoints, occupations, sectors and career paths were represented, and participants had an average high school level of education.

The Italian partner sought an even distribution of men and women, public and private sector employees (including undeclared workers or unemployed) for each of 3 groups. In Southern Italy's Salerno, an "intergenerational" theme group mobilized younger participants, and an "intersectorial" discussion group gathered older participants. An FG organized in the Central/Northern city of Ancona then enabled researchers to compare differing territorial visions.

The Polish team composed a first group in Cracow, homogeneous in that the men and women were all of about age 40, were married and employed. In Warsaw, a second group had a similar socio-economic profile but gathered two sets of very young and middle-aged women. This group was restricted to female participants in the hypothesis that their expression would be facilitated in the absence of men, to whom Cracow women had bowed as "experts". A third group in Cracow was also composed of women in the two age sets, but they were mostly unemployed. All these participants had no more than high school education.

Effective contact with candidates for participation was made by various means: Austrian researchers encountered success with a local newspaper announcement; the Italian team used a network method in which one principal contact was able to propose candidates; the French team relied on a combination of these methods; the Polish team cast a large net with a professional marketing recruitment approach using databases and on-street solicitation.

The recruitment process in most cases was resource-intensive and sometimes required a longer period than anticipated. The country reports provide a relatively detailed account of this part of the experience, which should be of interest to researchers or to policy makers who plan to conduct similar consultations.

4 Conduct of the Focus Group Consultations

4.1 Task outlines and discussion themes

The French consultation was the only one to address a single set list of discussion themes in each FG. These discussions were always preceded by a period for individual reflection and written preparation, with individual positions presented by turns, in order to avoid a "group think" phenomenon. Other group tasks encouraged members to keep track of their personal response to the group experience, including the evolution of their own convictions. The themes over the first three sessions were as follows:

Personal retirement situation and problems expected to be encountered; Important subjects for discussion in upcoming session; Contribution or Solidarity? Should pension be a delayed salary or a universal right?; Financing Pensions: Pay-as-you-go or Fully funded?; Financing Pensions: What are you willing to give up? What new contributions are you willing to make? Otherwise, where should the money come from?

The fourth French session was devoted to a reform model task: Council of Ministers on Pension Reform. This asked participants “which two ideas or proposals would you present if called in as a citizen to a high-level policy meeting?” and was followed by a collective deliberation.

The Italian programme used a common session structure to address 1) intergenerational and 2) intersectorial issues. The first session contained an expert illustration of the thematic topic, and the two subsequent sessions used exercises and moderated free discussion to gain participants’ views.

In Austria, a first session presented the research topic and allowed participants to introduce themselves and their pension concerns. The groups were then differentiated from the second session by moderated free discussion on the themes of 1) women’s problems in the pension system and 2) the pension problems of an aging society. Later sessions were devoted to expert input and deliberation on reform models.

The Polish team built up plans for subsequent groups by analysing each pilot or full group experience (five in all). Early meetings allowed the researchers to scope out topics of concern for the citizen participants and adjust upcoming meeting format or population to check and clarify these issues. Moderated free discussion, rather than specific discussion themes, was used, along with projective techniques (see next section).

Researchers in each report offer a frank appraisal of the shortcomings of their chosen approach, and the modifications brought to session plans in order to accommodate the research goals. This will be of value to organizers of future consultations who wish to avoid pitfalls regarding, e.g., maintaining participants’ interest and attention at a high level.

4.2 **Moderation techniques and impact on reporting style**

The country teams worked out more, or less, detailed guidelines for moderation. The PEN-REF consortium encompasses a range of disciplines including economists, political scientists, sociologists, social and clinical psychologists, and a physical scientist. Influences from each disciplinary position can be detected in chosen moderation and planning styles.

In general, it was agreed that the person or persons acting as FG moderator should abstain from guiding or influencing participants’ response to discussion themes. The moderator also ensured that ideas were fully expressed and that single members did not monopolize discussion.

The French partner explained their choice of combining a non-directive moderation style with a highly formalized rule and task structure:

“The non-directive approach by the moderator aimed at helping the participants to develop progressively their consciousness of the group entity and of its objectives, rather than reproducing a “teacher-student” or “expert-layperson” configuration. This approach, along with the rules set for group discussion, also helped the participants to develop a sufficient level of confidence and mutual respect allowing them to communicate and to work together.

The formality of the rules (set out beforehand by contract) and the proposed tasks provided *support* and *structure* that encouraged a sense of working progressively throughout the four sessions toward a decision goal.”

The Italian moderators held a variety of roles in the FG:

“The role of the two anchor persons, after the group warm-up phase, was characterized by an undulating attitude, quite similar to the movement of two surfers, moving with the waves that stirred the group but actively stepping in to develop the greatest possible broadmindedness and receptiveness with respect to the individual viewpoints, showing the constructive side of each one of them and preventing any participant from monopolizing the debate. One of the anchor persons acted for the most part as an “expert”, softly stepping in to provide the group with information whenever necessary to back up the evolution of the debate.”

The respect accorded to the language and arguments chosen by participants, reflected in the moderation style, was carried over in most cases to reporting style. All the country reports give extensive citations from focus group transcripts and written tasks. In their analytic discussion of the group material, PEN-REF partners differ in their decision, or not, to substitute technical pension “shorthand” for participants’ own terminology.

The French and Italian partners collected information on how individual participants weighted various aspects and options in the pension debate, with the use of a closed-form ranking tool developed for PEN-REF and administered at the opening and end of each group series. It was viewed that while it might have value as a large-scale survey tool, responses to the Value Chart were less informative than spoken group discourse or the reform proposals elaborated in final sessions. This finding confirms the choice to rely on the qualitative methodology of FG.

A number of exercises were used by the Italian team to stimulate participants to outline their positions; for example, they were asked to generate a pie-graph showing the breakdown of individual items of social expenditure.

The Polish team introduced the use of *projective techniques* in order to record material that participants might have difficulty verbalizing, and to “facilitate the observation of individual approaches to processing situations in a way consistent with their private world”. The focus groups split up into subgroups to create collages; the researchers suggest that this method is best applied before the group has carried out any formalized evaluation of the issues under discussion, and in the absence of an expert, as both these elements might introduce a pressure towards conformity. A sentence completion task was also used to gain individuals’ views and feelings on their personal retirement future. The team suggests that imposing a relatively short response period for this task may deliver more spontaneous material, less influenced by the desire to adjust answers to the researchers’ expectations.

The material obtained by these techniques was not used to interpret individuals’ personal situations, but was treated as indicative of viewpoints to be found in society. In the same manner, while individual interventions are sometimes analysed in the country reports, this is performed in order to provide insight into group dynamics rather than to speculate on private lives.

4.3 **Expert input**

In all groups, experts were available during one or more sessions to provide technical information or background to FG participants. The Austrian method included timed presentations by a widely divergent panel of three external experts, arguing their specific outlooks on a pension issue. The Polish partner also called on an external expert to make an interactive presentation. PEN-REF research colleagues provided a presentation on pension systems and reform history to the French and Italian groups.

The French partner also provided a public information brochure developed by the Geneva Association, to be read after the first session.

The pension reform models generated by the Austrian partners on the basis of FG discussions (see next section) appear to represent an expert input. These written models, although given in the form of “rough outline”, may be considered an expert reinterpretation of group discourse.

5 **Generation of Citizen Reform Proposals**

The content of the citizen reform proposals is analysed in WP4. Here we will mention the manner in which the reform proposals were generated in each country approach.

In each case an iterative process was used. The countries differ in the degree to which the researchers, acting as experts, intervened in the formulation of problem statements and solutions.

In Austria, the researchers analysed discussions from the first three sessions, and during the fourth session provided 3 to 4 written pension reform models that reflected the different views extracted from group discourse. These 400-500 word statements lay out the “problem, solution, and pension reform measures”. Individuals chose the model that most closely corresponded to their own view and attempted to refine it. In the 5th session, participants first grouped together by model affinity to discuss the statement, then met again to seek a full group compromise or “clumsy policy space”.

With the use of written reform models, the Austrian researchers constructed an interaction or collaboration between experts and participants in the goal of efficiently producing a policy statement. These were then refined and confronted in deliberation by participants.

The Italian team also worked closely with participants over the two final sessions to tease out policy implications and statements from group discourse, feeding these back to the group and moulding them into models.

The French and Polish partners each asked individual participants to write out the elements they would see in an ideal reformed pension system, and then debate these elements in the search for a group consensus or compromise.

The Polish team viewed that an open-ended initial generative process might prove difficult for participants. They saw a risk for omission of the concepts they identified as the most important ones from earlier discussion. The work was thus initiated by a questionnaire to ensure that individual members would address each concept. Refinement and debate was spread over several sessions, and participants were given the opportunity to check their statements after interacting with the expert consultant.

The French team used the assumption that members were prepared by the progressive build up of earlier group work to identify the most important issues and work intensively in one session to produce a coherent reform statement. This proved true in one group, while a second group's statement contained internal contradictions.

Despite these differences in method and in degree of expert intervention, many similar content elements are found across the entire sample of citizen reform proposals.

6 Content Analytic Process

Debriefing after each session among researchers—those acting as moderators and those in an observer or a monitoring role—was used, as is typical in FG research, as a safeguard against undue moderator influence upon the groups and as a means of generating a variety of interpretative paths and keeping them open.

PEN-REF country teams tape-recorded all FG discussions, in some cases using video recording as well. A considerable volume of time and effort was devoted by each team to checking and reviewing the typed transcripts.

Researchers in each country then applied the classical canons of content analysis: inclusion of all discourse in the data set; systematic application of sorting categories that could be explained and reproduced by independent checkers; iterative and collaborative development of those categories, predefined or inductive and emerging from a growing understanding of the material. In some cases, this content analysis was further supported by the use of a computerized tool to sort marked passages and map correlations among categories.

The four country reports differ in the accent placed on representing individual viewpoints, analyzing group dynamics, pulling out social values from discourse, communicating citizen views of pension systems and demands on reform, and detailing methodological issues. All these elements, however, are addressed in each report.

7 Findings on Citizen Participation

7.1 Confirmation of the value of active participation in policy deliberation

The Italian team observed that:



“The groups appeared at first to be but a set of individuals. They started tackling the issue of the pension system from a strictly personal point of view, on the basis of their history, their professional status, their gender and age, their (particular) interest. Quite clearly, the most commonly used pronoun was ‘I’. The debate and the mutual exchange of points of view allowed the surfacing of a more group-like vision, with a relative identification of the set of individuals as a group, while the pronoun ‘I’ began to be interwoven with the pronoun ‘WE’.

We have witnessed a passage from a simplistic vision, where each participant was convinced of having an easy recipe at hand to cope with the reform of the system, to a growing awareness of the complexity of the pension issue and how it is interwoven with such different issues as the labour market and welfare policies.

Finally, it seems worthwhile to lay emphasis on the enthusiasm and growing satisfaction of those who attended the Forum, firstly on account of the fact that they have been able to participate and deal with an issue that concerned all of them, but also and especially because they finally had a chance to speak up on such a crucial subject and that there was someone who was interested in listening to what they had to say.”

The Polish partner offers a general set of reasons for involving “regular citizens” in policy making. Along with many social researchers, public managers, and political scientists today, the authors find **value in citizen participation on three levels:**

1. At the level of public issue management – public involvement increases the effectiveness of projects; their efficiency also is raised, despite the fact that the time necessary to reach solutions extends as well.
2. At the social level – social participation activates the entire local community. In result, people become involved, pro-active, they discuss important problems of their communities, their knowledge about their environment increases. They overcome the distrust towards official actions and institutions.
3. At the political level – social participation is the school of democracy: people learn to discuss their mutual interest in the context of the common good. They become aware that acting together they may overcome even very difficult problems. People identify themselves with the programs being implemented, they feel as their co-authors, co-responsible for their implementation.

The PEN-REF research experience gave indications that **focus group consultation can indeed offer these levels of value**. Often, *this confirmation emerged from thoughtful evaluations by the participants themselves*. The French partner, for instance, reports that

“The evaluation of their experience by French FG members clearly suggests that the FG approach, if adopted as a form of citizen participation in social policy making, would be **well-accepted by participants**. It also appears that the FG experience **raised confidence** in the ability of the policy system to take citizen input into account. Although the research and simulation character of these meetings was explained to participants, they appeared to believe that decision makers very certainly will be considering their deliberations with interest, and they were proud and glad to contribute. Their comments indicate that despite the distance traditionally separating

the policy sphere from that of the common citizen, the latter are willing to enter into a **partnership**.

Participants felt they gave of themselves in a serious manner to *learn and deliberate* about a significant social issue. In this way, the FG experience emerges from participant evaluations as a **civic education tool**, appropriate for adults from a broad range of socio-cultural backgrounds.

More striking than participants' self-satisfaction is their discovery of the *satisfaction of listening*, and *adjusting* their own opinions as they learned more about persons in situations different from their own. In this way, and perhaps most importantly, the FG approach shows itself to be a **tool of civic cohesion**."

In the course of one Polish FG session, participants returned to a controversial issue (women's retirement age). They worked out why it had been difficult to hear and integrate all group opinions and thus come to a true compromise position — one differing from usual "social wisdom", and more responsive to securing a sustainable pension system. Their final comments evaluating their experience highlight the value of a small group deliberation process both for individuals and for society at large.

"During the last meeting, the respondents shared various observations about the course of meetings and their participation. It was emphasized that for many people it was the only chance to speak peacefully about issues (unfolding) in our country. It was emphasized that such meetings make us think, expand our horizons, and forces us to think about our opinions, verify thinking and behavior patterns we accept without any reflection. It was emphasized that usually nobody tries to understand what is going on in the state, but rather automatically forms opinions, which are usually critical towards solutions proposed by politicians. Retirement age for women served as a good example. The respondents emphasized that before the meeting, they would consider its increase and equalization with the men's' retirement age as an attempt on women's rights. They said that this assessment would only result from the fact that they had no knowledge and that nobody had explained to them clearly what underlies such changes and what were their real consequences. The respondents admitted that (in the focus group context) they approached this issue differently and they explain this by the knowledge they gathered and the possibility to have a peaceful and objective discussion about the issue.

The respondents' approach to this issue makes it possible to risk a hypothesis that an open and rational public discourse, held at levels adjusted to various participants of the debate, may result in the society being able to acknowledge and understand even such social policy solutions, which are commonly perceived as unpopular or disadvantageous."

7.2 Attaining policy compromise or stalemate

PEN-REF partners also reported a **measure of success in stimulating policy deliberation**—while recognizing that total compromise had not been achieved in each FG.

The Austrian authors point out that in order to generate general recommendations for political decision makers,

“It is a prerequisite that participants be willing to work out compromises with which all of them can live. There were some issues, as e.g. the major disadvantages of the present pension system, on which all participants agreed from the very beginning.

But there were also compromises, which could only be achieved after long, controversial discussion such the claim for a generally applicable, mandatory insurance, and issue that both focus groups agreed upon. In the beginning, retirement age was another controversial issue for Group 1 (...). However, it was finally also possible to find an agreement on this issue, which was acceptable to everyone.

A major issue on which no consensus could be reached was how to finance the future pensions system; the participants could not find an agreement on whether the individual pillars should be financed by contributions or by taxes, whether these should be mandatory or voluntary, and whether they should (be encouraged) by tax benefits.”

In the French case:

“It was demonstrated that a citizen gathering can work out a mature policy compromise: the task of identifying and agreeing essential reform elements led (one) group to analyse the practicalities of their demand, and to evolve away from prior positions in the shared goal of producing a sustainable pension model.

Insight was gained into the causes of failure in the (second) FG context to work out such a compromise: these include individualistic values, and generational (facts) with impact on career pattern.”

7.3 **Recommendations**

Each report outlines the value of the FG approach for both citizen involvement and for policy thinking. Each also recognizes that FG consultations cannot easily be conducted on a national scale.

The French partner observes that:

The FG research highlighted the fact that citizens may be seriously under-informed about their own pension situation, and suggested that structural factors behind this lack of information may also form a particularly difficult reform context.

On these bases a suggestion is formulated for a workable and meaningful community information/deliberation format.

A small-group interactive expert session and the intensive recursive discussion format used in the PEN-REF FG are not generalizable on a wide scale.

A modified deliberation method, although resource intensive, might address both citizen information and policy reform needs. We would suggest organizing a two-part

public event. This community-based event (repeated over the national territory) could be prepared and announced by an appropriate local State actor in collaboration with local social actors. **Larger-audience expert lectures would be followed by deliberative debate** in the first part of the public event. In the second part, **private consultations providing meaningful personalized pension information** would be offered to the local population over a period of days.
