



Community participation: policy-making in partnerships with community

Lessons from the field

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Deloitte and newDemocracy have come together to share eight principles learned from inviting community to participate in the policy-making process

How can we have community reference groups that are valued and trusted by communities and governments alike?

Background

'Participatory democracy' emerged in the literature as a response to the perceived declining effectiveness of representative democracy in the 1960s and 70s (van der Meer & Thompson, 2017). This reflected a desire to give citizens the opportunity to have a louder and more present voice in decisions directly affecting them.

Effective citizen engagement strengthens 'place-based approaches'. These approaches aim to bring together citizens in a particular place, with the expressed intent of addressing the complex needs of communities by harnessing the vision, resources and opportunities in each community.

The usual answer

As a result, more and more 'participatory forums' – such as community advisory bodies – were set up as a way to get people more involved in the policy making process that was typically run by government.

Common approaches to community engagement have included:

- **Community advisory groups** (with membership that may be self-nominated or handpicked by government, drawing from a limited pool of citizens who are known to be engaged)
- **Online platforms** (where the community is asked to provide feedback on a proposal or document, such forums often receive low levels of participation)

- **Personalised survey methods** such as door knocking or computer assisted telephone interviewing (where obtaining a significant sample is relatively high cost, however the data obtained is of high value)
- **Public forums such as town hall meetings** (where attracting a cross-section of the community is often difficult, unless the issue is highly topical and/or contentious).

Problems with the usual answer

For a number of reasons, many of these attempts have not achieved the anticipated level or quality of community engagement. One issue is that these processes have traditionally been established *by* government, for reasons such as responding to an Inquiry or Commission, public outcry on a topic of interest, to manage public perception or to comply with legislative or contractual requirements. There have been cases where participatory forums emerged from grassroots activism, yet the impact or authority of these organic groups has often been tenuous. They may also struggle to sustain an ongoing role.

Community advisory groups drawn from volunteers typically attract the angriest voices and promote polarised views, may adopt pre-determined or preconceived agendas, and may be dominated by a small number of individuals. They are typically not genuinely representative of the community even if that language is promoted—rather, they are examples of 'audience democracy' (Manin, 1997).

Decision makers may find it difficult to act on recommendations from activist groups because they do not resemble the wider community. It's

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likely to result in a response such as “well they would say that”. A corollary is that activist groups do not trust decision makers for somewhat similar reasons.

The usual approaches have, of course, sometimes yielded useful results. Much is dependent on the true objective of establishing a community advisory group. If it is only intended to provide advice that is tokenistic or *ad hoc* – then so be it. However, if the purpose is to genuinely engage, empower, motivate and inspire trust in the process and the outcome, then these approaches are often missing the mark.

In identifying a better way, a starting point is to recognise that the experience of participants is invaluable because of their local knowledge. However, the emphasis should be on bringing together a diversity of views because this has been shown to lead to better decision making (Landemore, 2012). It should be possible to look at the assembled group of people and reflect that ‘these are people like us’—they look like the wider community.

Alternatives to the usual answer

There are ways to overcome weaknesses—convening a mini-public, or a miniature population, is the key. Once a diverse sample of views is brought together via a mini-public such as a citizens’ jury, with participants given sufficient information and opportunities to call on experts of their choosing, then sensible recommendations that can be accepted by the wider community and decision makers will follow. These recommendations will be reasonable and actionable. If implemented, trust in decision

making inevitably grows. Participants, and observing activists, will want to own those recommendations and will stand behind them.

A civic lottery is an excellent demonstration of fairness: everyone has a chance to be selected. This will not be the case for a traditional advisory group because currently-unengaged or disengaged citizens will stay away or not be asked. The deliberation within a mini-public will be a robust contrast to this. Whereas active stakeholders will find it difficult to consider new solutions, diverse and randomly-selected participants are unlikely to have entrenched positions as their starting point. It will also demonstrate procedural fairness as long as an independent facilitator is commissioned to enable the group to find its own way.

Case studies

Citizen advisory groups in their current form are commonly said to be tokenistic, too little, or too late. As such, it is timely to reflect on what goes wrong, what might we learn from this, and how might we start to think about re-engaging community in the policy-making process in a new and better way. What follows are two case studies demonstrating two very different approaches.

Geelong Citizens’ Jury

Following the dismissal of the Greater Geelong City Council, in April 2016 the Victorian Minister for Local Government commissioned a Citizens’ Jury of 100 randomly-selected citizens to answer the question “*How do we want to be democratically represented by a future council?*” In contrast to convening local notable figures and

opinion leaders, the task was given to citizens picked via a civic lottery with invitations sent to 15,000 households who came together for five full-day meetings spaced across 3½ months¹.

The project was successful in being able to recruit a genuinely random group who had not previously been involved in public decisions or any form of organised advocacy. Participants came from all parts of the area, were of differing ages and a variety of different life experiences, careers and backgrounds. They were able to come to informed common ground positions, and were able to demonstrate a rationale for some contentious choices where their judgment differed from the expected “public opinion view”. As one example, where citizens often demand a directly-elected mayor as a reasonable ‘top of mind’ way to have control over their local authority, the Jury formed the view that a councillor-elected mayor offered a better mechanism to run the city efficiently as that would ensure the councillors picked someone they could work with. While there is no single “right answer” to this question, their answer demonstrates that they had weighed the trade-offs involved in their choice of approach. The Victorian Government and the State Parliament ultimately agreed to adopt 12 out of 13 of their recommendations.

The two main opportunities for improvement in this project revolved around scheduling, and operating amid a controversial political environment. Unlike a self-selected group involving subject matter advocates, a random group does not operate well under sustained political attack: where an

¹ <https://www.newdemocracy.com.au/2016/07/10/local-government-victoria-democracy-in-geelong/>

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issue has hit a point of acute controversy some citizens would rather not participate. The second key learning relates to the difficulty of estimating the time required for a task: citizens take the job very seriously and will not rush to judgment. Estimates of time should err on the generous side. With a multi-year unresolved dilemma or wicked problem an extra 1-2 months can be a very sound investment.

Latrobe Health Assembly (the Assembly)

Following the catastrophic fire at the Hazelwood coal mine in 2014, the Hazelwood Mine Fire Inquiry was established. It led to 246 recommendations that were overwhelmingly accepted by the Victorian Government. A central recommendation relating to community health and wellbeing was the establishment in 2016 of a 45-member participatory forum known as the Latrobe Health Assembly (the Assembly).

The Assembly is funded by the Department of Health and Human Services. It is supported by a backbone office including an executive officer and several other full-time employees. The Assembly is an incorporated entity with a 10-person Board, comprising five mandated members from major health providers and stakeholders in the region. It is chaired by one of the authors of the Inquiry, who is also an internationally-recognised public-health researcher. There are four community board members. The remaining 35 non-Board Assembly members comprise representatives from health and wellbeing organisations or local community members who live in the Latrobe Valley community.

The primary role of the Assembly is to facilitate a new way of working to enable the community, local and state-wide agencies and government to work together to improve health and wellbeing in the Latrobe Valley.

The whole of the Assembly meets 4-5 times per year to hear from speakers, connect with each other and workshop ideas. However, much of the work of the Assembly is done via the four Pillar Groups, each of which focuses on a broad priority area. These groups generate ideas that may become trial Assembly projects. The projects go through a 'business case' type process, discussed by the whole Assembly and ultimately approved by the Board. Many projects have been funded with a diverse range of objectives and approaches².

The Assembly is an ambitious and novel initiative given its scope and level of autonomy. There have been several lessons that have been learned, including that community and government do not necessarily work to the same timelines and that expectation management, on both sides, is particularly important. It has taken some time for awareness and understanding of the Assembly to develop within the community. Equally the Assembly needed to develop a sense of purpose, an operating model and a way of engaging the wider community. These have evolved incrementally but it now has considerable momentum through the establishment of many community-based projects. Certain challenges remain, including achieving deeper engagement with disengaged or vulnerable community members. However, it has an opportunity to build on these foundations in making a significant contribution to sustained

improvement in health and wellbeing outcomes over the long term.

Ideas to improve and revitalise participation

Where do the above case studies leave us? Overall we consider that advisory bodies can be improved and revitalised in a number of ways, drawing on our collective experiences.

Lessons from both research and the field can be summarised in the following eight principles. These should ideally be considered when setting up forums with the objective of empowering community based decision making:

1. **START WITH A LEGITIMATE QUESTION:** Only invite community opinion and advice on a question – entering into the process with a pre-determined answer won't engender community buy-in nor will it build trust. There must be genuine commitment to asking the community an as-yet unanswered question, and a commitment from senior decision-makers to then act on the answer that emerges. A senior government official should launch the participatory process and be available to hear and understand the outcome, to give the process the necessary legitimacy.
2. **TRANSPARENCY IS KEY:** the process to establish participation should be transparent, representative and ideally, based on stratified random selection.
3. **THE COMMUNITY HAVE TO WANT IT:** it is difficult or even unpalatable to suggest that governments should 'dictate' or 'command' citizens to

² <http://healthassembly.org.au/projects/>

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- participate, but participation requires effort and input from both the polity and citizens.
4. **MAKE IT EASY:** achieving effective participation is challenging – particularly for those who are already disengaged or disenfranchised. Citizens may require additional support to participate and to ensure a capacity to understand and generate ideas is widespread.
 5. **CLARITY OF ROLE AND PURPOSE:** the role of the body has to be clear. There should be clear roles, responsibilities and the time commitment required should be clearly communicated. These groups should also recognise that voluntary participation in these groups is key and that some community members may face barriers to participation. These barriers need to be considered and addressed, as best as possible
 6. **'PEOPLE LIKE ME':** people have to believe in the process, and know that the eventual decision was made in an impartial way. The best way to achieve this is to set up advisory bodies using random sampling.
 7. **GET WHAT YOU PAY FOR:** recognise that public servants are getting paid to set these forums up, whereas the community are generally expected to contribute for free. Recognise the time and effort that the community members are giving. Think about the barriers to participation and reduce them (e.g. travel costs, food, drink, issues accessing child care, out of hours consideration, casual workers)
 8. **GREATER THAN THE SUM OF ITS PARTS:** the community advisory group should act as a conduit between different

community groups. This will likely lead to enhanced horizontal trust between the community and the political class. Group members may need support, encouragement and resources to help them leverage and tap into their existing social networks.

Finally, every circumstance is different and will present its own challenges. While the intent of community empowerment is noble, it is not straightforward. However, the impact and quality of what will be delivered warrants a commitment to these models. It may take longer than we expect and it may provide some surprises, but we can be confident that handing communities this responsibility, with the appropriate guidance and support, will deliver better decision making and outcomes over time.

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