

## Mini-public deliberation in philanthropy: A new way to engage with the public

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## Mini-public deliberation in philanthropy: A new way to engage with the public

### ***What is the question?***

Philanthropic foundations (“philanthropies”) are organisations created to advance social progress by funding solutions to social problems, free from the political and institutional constraints of government<sup>1</sup> (Porter and Kramer, 1999). As of 2018, there were just over a quarter of a million philanthropies, in just under 40 countries, with total assets close to USD1.5 trillion, many of which have come into being in the last 30 years ([Johnson, 2018](#)). The philanthropic sector is not only large and expanding - it is also powerful and influential, far beyond its size. As government budgets in many countries have struggled to keep pace with social needs, philanthropies have increasingly stepped into the public arena to shape solutions to intractable social problems as a force for social good independent of government and/or the market.

In the last few decades, organised philanthropy has been subject to increasing criticism and challenges to its legitimacy, based on the question of who is included – and who *should* be included – in philanthropic decision making (Kraeger and Robichau, 2017, Kraeger, 2019). Most commonly, philanthropy leaders have decided how to allocate their funding by themselves, sometimes consulting experts, strategically chosen grantees, and long-term funding partners (for information about knowledge sources, see this report by the [Hewlett Foundation, 2017](#)).

Over recent decades, an increasing number of philanthropies have sought the views of members of the public when allocating funding, and for decision-making related to strategy and policy. (Arriaga, n.d.; Escobar and Elstub, 2017; Kraeger and Robichau, 2017; Reich, 2018). This brings up an important methodological question:

*When philanthropic organisations want to include members of the public in their decision processes, how should they do it?*

### ***What are the usual answers, and why are they not sufficient?***

Philanthropic organisations have used a variety of methods to consult with members of the public (in particular, people with “lived experience” relevant to their decisions), including focus groups, listening sessions, community conversations, town hall meetings, summits, online dialogues and surveys. These consultations between philanthropy and community to incorporate feedback in organisational strategy and action are promising, and for many purposes these methods can work well. However, for decisions about policy-affecting philanthropy and place-based philanthropy, they generally have three weaknesses in common:

- The members of the public are self-selected or selected by program officers.
- The participants do not have enough time or information to explore topics in depth.

<sup>1</sup> Philanthropies, and organised or institutional philanthropy, used interchangeably in this R & D note, refer to philanthropic foundation organisations - not individuals or NGO/civil society/non-profit organisations delivery services.

- These conversations are not “deliberative” – that is, designed to enable participants to listen to each other and to develop thoughtful new conclusions together.

In terms of the first weakness, using a self-selected (or program officer selected) group of participants has two disadvantages: the group of participants is likely to be not very representative of the public; and self-selected groups are open to manipulation in terms of who participates, by interest groups and grantmakers. For both reasons, consultations with self-selected members of the public will be vulnerable to suspicion in terms of their legitimacy. Members of the public, or of particular affected communities, need to see people like themselves represented in decision making processes in order to trust those processes.

In terms of the second and third weaknesses, the usual processes of public consultation collect public *opinion*, but they are not designed to produce public *judgment* – thoughtful, well-informed conclusions that can be supported by both grantmakers and the public. The participants are usually not given new information, and they typically do not have the opportunity for in-depth, well-facilitated conversation with people whose lived experience and perspectives are different from theirs.

### ***What is a better alternative, and what are its advantages?***

There is an alternative approach to public engagement – informed, in-depth, professionally facilitated *deliberation* among *randomly selected* samples of the public (Carson & Hart, 2005; Gastil & Richards, 2013; Schechter, 2017; and Yankelovich, 1991). It is a practice that is new to philanthropy, although it has been used extensively as part of public policy decisions in many countries. Research and practice show that the collective judgment of diverse citizens allows for complex decision-making in a deliberative process (Carson, 2018; Hartz-Carp and Carson, 2013). Variations of the process go by many names (citizens’ juries, citizens’ assemblies, mini-publics, planning cells, consensus conferences, deliberative polls). We will use the generic term of “mini-public.” Mini-publics allow a representative group of members of the public to come together “to learn and deliberate on a topic to inform public opinion and decision-making” (Dahl, 1989; Escobar and Elstub, 2017).

Compared to the usual ways of consulting with the public, mini-public deliberation offers:

- a more diverse and representative group of participants
- a better conversation - more informed, more thoughtful, more in-depth
- increased public trust - in the process, the decisions, and the decision makers

To our knowledge this approach has not been used in philanthropy, but the use of mini-public deliberation in philanthropy has been proposed by at least one public deliberation practitioner (Arriaga, 2018).

We do not advocate mini-public deliberation for all philanthropic decision making. For many purposes, current consulting practices work well, including recent participatory grantmaking efforts. Mini-public deliberation can be costly, and it takes time. It is most worthwhile in cases when philanthropic decisions are important, difficult, and where trust by the public or particular affected communities is an issue.

### ***How would it work?***

There is no “one size fits all” process. Many successful variations have been used, and each situation will require some form of customised design, guided by an experienced

practitioner organisation. However, the basic stages in the process can be described like this:

Stage 1 (preparation):

- Foundation staff define the decision to be made (“We have \$X dollars to spend on policy area Y, with criteria Z - how should we spend the money?”).
- An independent outside organisation recruits and convenes a “mini-public” (a randomly selected sample of the public). If the decision affects public policy, or is intended to serve an entire jurisdiction, this will be a sample of the general public. If the philanthropic decisions are only designed to serve a particular population (“affected community”) within a jurisdiction, and do not involve public policy, it may be useful to recruit a random sample of that population.
- Mini-public members get a short course in critical thinking (e.g. how to question experts and stakeholders).

Stage 2 (deliberation):

- Mini-public members study background information on the decision and options.
- Mini-public members hear from, and question, stakeholders and experts. Mini-public members play a role in choosing the speakers, and plan questions in advance. The speakers are “on tap, not on top” – they are there mainly to answer questions from mini-public members, not to make impressive presentations.
- Mini-public members deliberate, find common ground and write recommendations. The aim is for them to find informed, feasible recommendations, a synthesis of their best thinking, that they can all strongly agree on, or as close as possible. In other words, the process produces not public opinion, but public *judgment* (Yankelovich, 1991).

Stage 3 (decision making):

- Foundation staff review recommendations.
- Foundation staff meet with mini-public members.
- Foundation staff decide what they will do (or not do) with the mini-public recommendations.
- Foundation staff make a public statement of their decision and their rationale.

For more detailed information on the activities of each stage see:

- [How to do it – the stages of Mini-public deliberation.](#)
- [Enabling National Initiative to Take Democracy Beyond Elections.](#)
- For information about experienced practitioners in different countries, see the [Democracy R&D network](#).

### **Benefits**

More diverse and representative selection of participants:

- A randomly selected sample of the public, with the conditions they need to study the situation, consider all views, deliberate together, and make a good recommendation
- Inclusion of relevant stakeholder voices, speaking and interacting but not deciding
- A balanced selection of experts, as advisors (not decision makers)

A deeper and more complex conversation:

- More diverse, more inclusive
- Less adversarial

- Reduces perceived and actual power imbalances
- More informed
- Less distorted by power (for example, it is much easier for current and potential grantees to speak frankly to a mini-public than to foundation staff)

Stronger recommendations:

- Informed by a wider range of relevant views
- Participants had the time to become truly informed
- Less self-interested, less adversarial (the mini-public has no special interest stake in the outcome)

Increased public trust - it will be clear to grantees, community advocates, politicians, and the public that:

- Decisions were not made by a few foundation people “behind closed doors” (reduces public perception of philanthropic elitism)
- All relevant voices were included, and taken seriously
- The process was not "stacked" for or against any particular group
- An informed "voice of the public" was represented, and made the final recommendation

### ***Evidence from practice***

As far as we know, mini-public deliberation has not yet been tried within organised philanthropy. However, it has been used hundreds of times in the public sphere, with a great deal of success, in many countries. The examples include levels of government from local to international, and a wide variety of issues, including national deliberations about same sex marriage and abortion (Ireland), climate policy (France), and the processes of democracy itself (Germany).

Particularly relevant to philanthropic decisions about allocating funding are cases in which mini-publics determined the allocation of entire city budgets and entire budgets for long-term capital plans. Several of these have taken place in Australia, including in [Melbourne](#) (City of Melbourne People's Panel, 2014) and [Greater Geraldton](#) (Greater Geraldton Council, 2014; Weymouth and Hartz-Karp, 2019).

### **Requirements for success (time, cost, commitments):**

- Time: If participants do not have enough time to become well informed and to deliberate, the process will fail. Typically, they need to spend 30 to 40 hours on an issue, meeting for multiple days spread over a number of weeks (sometimes multiple days in succession, sometimes spread over longer periods). Time is also required to select participants, select experts and advocates, and prepare for deliberation (See, [Time](#)).
- Cost: A quality process is not cheap. A good selection process costs money. Participants need to be paid for their time. Professional process design and facilitation are very important.
- Commitments: Decision makers need to commit to (a) meeting with the mini-public and discussing their recommendations in detail; and (b) making a clear, public statement about what they intend to do with the recommendations, and their rationale.

### ***Addressing possible objections***

*We want open, inclusive participation. Randomly selected groups would exclude many people who want to participate.*

“Open” (self-selected) participation tends to attract “the usual suspects” – groups of participants that are not representative of the public as a whole. These groups are often dominated by people who come to the deliberations with their minds made up about an issue. In addition, self-selected participation processes are open to manipulation (and public suspicion of manipulation) by stakeholders and/or the staff of philanthropies (Carson and Hart, 2005).

*These “mini-publics” are very small. We want participation at large scale.*

Even with the best techniques and software platforms, it is extremely difficult (and expensive) to have high quality deliberation with large numbers of participants. Having thousands of people express their opinions in a superficial way might make them feel good, but it will result in public *opinion*, when what is needed is public *judgement*.

*We have a diversity and equity lens in our work. How would this type of deliberation address that?*

Mini-public deliberation, done well, can eliminate three common sources of inequity in decision making (for example, inequity in terms of class, race/ethnicity, gender, and/or sexuality):

- Under-representation of marginalised people in decision making conversations (stratified random sampling can overcome this, by selecting a group that is diverse and sufficiently representative of the whole public)
- Under-representation of marginalised people among the experts and advocates who present their views to the decision making or advisory body (good practices for "expert" selection can overcome this)
- Domination of the conversations by more privileged people (good facilitation can overcome this)

*This type of process would take too long, and cost too much, for something that involves so few people. Why not spend a lot less, do it faster, and get a lot more people involved?*

A high-quality public deliberation process offers substantial benefits – a more representative group of participants, a deeper conversation, stronger recommendations, and increased public trust. These benefits cannot be realised with insufficient time and money. For philanthropic decisions that are important and difficult, in cases where public trust in those decisions is an important issue, the results of good public deliberation are well worth the time and cost.

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