

A Report on CPRN's Community Forum
“Integrating Citizens’ Voices into Policy Discourse”

IAP2 Conference

Ottawa, Ontario

May, 2003

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C. Presentation by Judith Maxwell is available from our Web site at www.cprn.org/public involvement/learning events	

Introduction

Since its establishment in 1995, CPRN has emerged as a leader in public involvement in Canada. In 2002, CPRN made a further commitment to the field with the creation of the new Public Involvement Network. Over this time period, CPRN has been engaging citizens in its policy research on social and economic issues and in so doing, creating knowledge for the policy makers and citizens alike. Drawing on its work (*Exploring Canadian Values (1995)* through to *The Society We Want (1997-98)* and more recently *Quality of Life in Canada, Citizens' Dialogue on the Future of Health Care in Canada*, and the most recent *Citizens' Dialogue on Canada: A 21st Century Social Contract*), CPRN has learned many lessons pertaining to public dialogue. The Community Forums, which were part of the May 2003 IAP2 conference program, gave CPRN an excellent opportunity to share some of these lessons with over 30 public participation practitioners who were delegates at the Conference. CPRN's Community Forum took place on May 21, 2003, from 1:30 – 5:00 p.m.

Objectives

The objectives of CPRN's Community Forum were two-fold:

1. Enhance skills to implement public involvement initiatives
2. Build the case for citizen engagement – overcoming challenges and identifying opportunities

The Forum's interactive design was intended to simulate aspects of the dialogue methodology CPRN used in its recent national dialogues with citizens.

Participants¹

In addition to the four representatives/presenters from CPRN, there were 33 conference delegates from three countries - Canada, United States and Mexico. The participants came from governments at the international, national, provincial/state, and municipal levels, academic institutions and the private sector. They were consultants, practitioners, academics and policy makers with interests that spanned diverse areas, including education, environment, health, justice, fisheries and oceans, and participation per se. This diversity is not unlike the diversity of people found in CPRN national dialogues.

Agenda²

Judith Maxwell, CPRN's President, opened the forum and invited participants to introduce themselves. Following this roundtable, she then spoke about key results of CPRN dialogue projects.

Ms. Maxwell pointed out that:

¹ See Appendix A for the Participant List.

² See CPRN's Community Forum Agenda in Appendix B

- Citizens have an untapped capacity to be involved and to contribute to public policy and they want to be involved.
- Only citizens can integrate economic, social and political values, unlike policy makers who often approach issues with too narrow a perspective.
- Citizens are open to change and they want action. Ms. Maxwell noted that receptivity to citizen engagement is growing, at least in Canada.
- Evaluation, lessons learned and identification of best practices are required.
- The field is not without challenges, including funding and time commitments, political will, power-sharing and building critical mass, amongst the citizens, policy makers and practitioners alike.

With the stage set, participants broke into three small groups to build the case for public involvement using a specific public policy issue chosen from one of four pre-identified issues or from their own experience and situations. Participants discussed the challenges, barriers, opportunities and benefits related to undertaking a public dialogue on the issue of their choice. They self-moderated these discussions, as was the case in our national dialogues on health care and the future of Canada. After an hour of deliberation, all participants reconvened in plenary, and the rapporteur for each group presented the results of the groups' work in plenary. There was some discussion on each of the presentations, primarily to seek clarification. At the request of the participants, the Forum concluded with a more detailed explanation and focussed discussion on the methodology used by CPRN in its public dialogues.

Discussion Highlights

Building the case for a public dialogue on Public Accountability

- The time is ripe for a public dialogue on accountability as public interest in accountability is already high.
- The audience for a dialogue on this issue includes the general public, decision-makers and funders, including representatives of government, not-for-profit foundations and major donors.
- The opportunities and benefits for a dialogue on accountability outweigh the perceived challenges or barriers.
- If a dialogue on accountability took place, citizens would appreciate that not only were they heard through previous dialogues, but their concerns were being addressed.
- A dialogue on accountability would bring greater clarity and understanding and knowledge about existing government expenditures and monitoring and the various dimensions of accountability.
- There are some formidable barriers to consider as well, not the least being the challenge to status quo thinking.

Building the case for a public participation process on a policy for Public Subsidies to Airlines

- A public participation process on this issue would bring forth better, more innovative options or solutions that are acceptable, have wide public support, and are sustainable and cost-effective.
- Such a process would contribute to building relationships amongst parties who are crucial to the resolution of this file, and to building trust between citizens and public institutions and partnerships between public institutions and commercial enterprises.
- The public would be better informed of the complexities of the issue and would be better able to identify the trade-offs needed to be made to balance the commercial and public interests at play.
- Against the backdrop of these benefits, there are challenges. How to define the public – stakeholders, citizens, regions, other? Who should be part of the conversation? How to balance regional needs and market tests? How to balance regional concerns while being representative of the whole population? Or the travelling population?
- The diversity of interests and the “politics” of the issue also bring great complexity to the task of finding common ground.
- There is a well documented history of bail-outs for the airlines industry, one which the public may not wish to see repeated.

Building the case for a public dialogue to address the Democratic Deficit

- This group discussed ways to address the democratic deficit rather than how to build the case for a dialogue on the subject.
- They saw opportunities for deliberative dialogue at local or community levels on issues of interest to citizens in these localities. It would give citizens an opportunity to engage with each other on issues of common interest which would be a significantly different quality of experience from ballot-voting.
- Interaction between different levels of government would be strengthened through a greater exchange of information.
- There would be opportunities for greater uses of technology, greater involvement on the part of youth and processes could be more transparent than is currently the case.
- There are also several challenges, including cynicism on the part of citizens towards government, elected officials and decision-makers from all fields.
- Weak voter turn-out due to the inconvenience of voting, voter apathy and selfishness were also identified as barriers to decreasing the democratic deficit, as were political party structures, time and money.

Comment:

- There was insufficient time to allow the participants to look across the individual reports to look for elements of common ground needed to build the case for public dialogue. As well, the suggestion was made that this would have been easier if all three groups had been tasked with discussing the same policy issue. Participants wanted to learn more about CPRN’s experience and approach to deliberative

dialogue so the simulation exercise stopped a little short of what had been planned with the remaining time (45 minutes) devoted to more detailed discussions of CPRN's deliberative dialogue processes.

Next Steps/Conclusions

Feedback from the participants (as shown in the evaluations and comments during the Forum) indicates that participants want to learn more about CPRN's deliberative dialogue processes. Participants are interested in not only learning how to manage such large public involvement projects, but also how to develop the specific tools and instruments required to provide the data and analysis frameworks to produce the kind of results CPRN has produced. CPRN's Public Involvement Network intends to pursue this avenue in the months ahead, exploring the potential to host learning events.

**IAP2 2003 Conference
CPRN Community Forum – May 21, 2003
List of Participants**

Katherine Beavis
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Vancouver, BC

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IAP2 2003 Conference CPRN Community Forum

Integrating citizens' voices into policy discourse

May 21, 2003, 1:30 – 5:00 p.m., 250 Albert Street, 14th Floor, Auditorium

Agenda

Using the lessons learned in three recent deliberative dialogues, participants will explore how to foster the systematic integration of citizens' voices into the public policy process in their communities – local to national

1:30 – 2:25

Setting the Stage

- Welcome and Roundtable
- CPRN Presentation on Dialogue Work
- Video: Citizens' Dialogue on Canada's Future (11 minutes)

**2:25 – 4:00
involvement**

Case study working groups – building the case for public

- Issue (Participants choose the issue or select a CPRN issue³)
- Challenges
- Opportunities

4:00 - 4:45

Reports to plenary – looking for common ground

4:45 – 5:00

Wrap up - conclusions

Objectives of Session:

1. Enhancing skills to implement public involvement initiatives
2. Building the case for citizen engagement – overcoming challenges and identifying opportunities

³ CPRN issues : identifying core Canadian values; defining “accountability” from a citizens’ perspective; identifying way to address the “democratic deficit”; and ways to manage North American economic integration