



What is Public Dialogue?

January 2000

What is Public Dialogue? is based on the lessons learned from *The Society We Want*, a national public dialogue project of the Canadian Policy Research Networks, Inc. (CPRN). It would not have been possible without the encouragement and support of CPRN.

Acknowledgments

We would like to thank the following for their support and advice. Our effort to complete a manual for federal departments could not have been achieved without them.

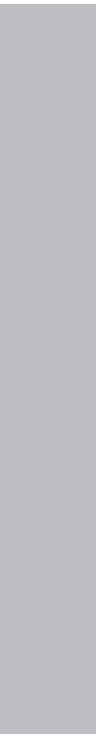
Canada Information Office
Canadian Environmental Assessment Agency
Canadian Heritage
Citizenship and Immigration Canada
Climate Change Secretariat
Elections Canada
Environment Canada
Health Canada
Human Resources Development Canada
Justice Canada
National Round Table on the Environment and the Economy
Natural Resources Canada
Privy Council Office
Policy Research Secretariat
Public Policy Forum
Public Service Commission
Public Works and Government Services Canada
Solicitor General
Treasury Board of Canada Secretariat

The Centre also wishes to thank the members of the project team for their efforts:
Rhonda Ferderber, Miriam Wyman, Sandra Zagon, Valerie Taraska and Joe Michalski.

Contents

- 1. Introduction 1**
 - Why now? 1
- 2. What is citizen engagement? 2**
- 3. When to use citizen engagement 3**
- 4. What is public dialogue? 4**
 - How does public dialogue differ from focus groups
and other processes of citizen engagement? 6
- 5. Public dialogue—The benefits 7**
- 6. Other tools for citizen engagement 8**
 - Search Conferences 8
 - Citizen Juries 8
 - Deliberative Polling 9
 - Study Circles 10
- 7. Conclusion 12**
- 8. Endnotes 13**





What is Public Dialogue?

Objectives

This paper:

- Presents the case for incorporating citizen engagement in policy development and decision-making processes, as well as in program development and delivery of services
- Discusses when and where it makes most sense to use a citizen engagement approach
- Describes some of the existing tools for citizen engagement
- Introduces **public dialogue** as a particularly effective tool for involving ordinary citizens in a meaningful way

1. Introduction

Public involvement is a broad term that can be used to refer to all of the increasingly diverse methods governments use in communicating and gaining citizen input concerning their programs and policies. Each of the existing processes for public involvement is appropriate for the purposes for which it was designed.

Communication processes

- Public meetings, workshops, toll-free numbers, Internet sites, multi-media presentations and workbooks, when used properly, can be effective ways of reaching and providing information to the public.

Consultation processes

- Focus groups, public opinion polling and calling for briefs can be useful for gauging opinion, obtaining reaction from a stakeholder or client group to preliminary proposals or options, and determining what additional information or modifications may be needed to develop proposals further.

Citizen-engagement processes

- Search conferences, citizen juries, deliberative polling, study circles and public dialogue are appropriate tools to use to inform policy and the decision-making process with citizen perspectives and values and to hear more in-depth thinking from citizens about key public policy issues.

Why now?

Within Canada's parliamentary system, citizens already have opportunities to provide input to decision making in a multitude of ways: through elections, government initiated referenda, legislative hearings, royal commissions, constituent surveys, opinion polls, town hall meetings, focus groups, policy conferences and round tables (to name only the most prominent). In these and other ways, governments have made new attempts to facilitate public input over past years.¹

Yet citizen trust in their governing institutions appears to have declined over the past two decades. Polling research indicates that citizens feel that the amount of actual influence they have in shaping our society is far below what it should be, and that much of the consultation that does occur between the government and its electorate is lacking in legitimacy.²

Citizens are calling for an increased voice in decision making as they question whether voting, legislative hearings, and other mechanisms allow for the adequate expression of their issues and concerns. They no longer appear willing to have public policy made behind closed doors only to have governments return to the public with ‘solutions.’ Citizens want a more meaningful role to play in their own governance.

Canada is restructuring the ways in which governments relate to one another and to citizens in the context of the Social Union Framework Agreement. The Agreement is “based upon a mutual respect between orders of government and a willingness to work more closely together to meet the needs of Canadians.”³ The Agreement acknowledges that citizens have an important role to play in shaping their society and commits the signatories to “work in partnership with individuals, families, communities, voluntary organizations, business and labour, and ensure appropriate opportunities for Canadians to have meaningful input into social policies and programs.”⁴ It may be that co-operation and collaboration are no longer questions of opportunity; they are essential means of conducting the nation’s business.⁵

2. What is citizen engagement?

Citizen engagement is a process of interaction between decision-making bodies (often governments) and citizens affected by those decisions. It is about giving citizens a voice on issues that matter to them and that will have an impact on their lives.

Citizen engagement differs from more traditional forms of public involvement or consultation by encouraging reflection and learning, and promoting a focus on common ground. It recognises and accepts that citizens will add value, allows new options to emerge, and takes the time necessary for that to happen.⁶

Citizen engagement offers governments ways to hear more fully from citizens and builds governments’ capacity to do so. It also builds capacity for citizens to become more involved.

It can enrich the relationship between governments and citizens and has the following characteristics:

- Citizen engagement is an avenue that creates opportunities for citizens to talk to one another and to decision-makers.
- Citizen engagement allows for in-depth, substantive, and deliberative discussions that can help to reconcile polarised opinion.
- Citizen engagement is supported by factual, balanced information that is written in plain language and delivered in a transparent, meaningful and timely way.
- Citizen engagement is an open-ended process in which there are no pre-determined outcomes.
- Citizen engagement can be an ongoing process.

Citizen engagement does not bypass the roles and responsibilities of elected representatives or organizations that exist to bring forward the views of specific groups of people. It is rather a complement to such activities—an enhancement. It is one way to broaden democratic participation in issues of public policy.

3. When to use citizen engagement

Citizen engagement is a way for governments to involve citizens when the objective is to:

- Hear in depth from citizens about key public policy issues
- Inform the policy-making and decision-making processes based on citizen views and values
- Share responsibility for the process and ownership of outcomes
- Mobilise energy and enthusiasm to work on key social issues
- Give citizens a renewed sense that their views do matter, that their voices can make a difference

Traditional consultation processes continue to have their place—especially when governments need feedback on more immediate (often more technical) issues. When governments are looking for a deeper understanding of core values or for guidance on priorities, they need a process that provides time and space for deeper reflection and deliberation. Tools that are more deliberative involve listening, learning, and respecting the views of other people. Using these tools, it is possible to understand the true dynamics of opinion, confront biases, and encourage evolution in the thinking of all participants.

The following are examples of circumstances in which citizen engagement may prove an important tool for policy development:

- In the early stages of policy development
- When an emerging issue does not yet have an owner—or where there are multiple owners and each needs strategic information to formulate a response
- When a firm position has not yet been taken by a Minister or the government and an open discussion of options is desired
- When an issue is sufficiently controversial that no Minister or government wishes to be associated with it until its true dimensions are better understood (e.g., genetically modified foods)
- When a sophisticated exploration of potential trade-offs is needed (e.g., environmental protection and economic development)
- When a deeper understanding of underlying (changing) values is required to formulate action plans (e.g., law reform)
- When the government needs to understand how to build citizen commitment in facing a complex challenge (e.g., climate change)

In all of the above cases, other consultation tools (polls, briefs, committee hearings) and forms of communication (press releases, advertisements, events) will likely be necessary at appropriate stages of the policy and program development process—to inform, to gauge reaction, and to provide feedback. It is important to think through how results will be used.

Tools For Public Involvement

	Communication	Consultation	Citizen Engagement
Main Characteristics	‘Information out’ Citizens as audience	‘Information in’ Response to communication Vocal citizens and stakeholders to be taken into account	‘Interaction’ Deliberative dialogue Citizens as partners Capacity building Feedback to citizens Accountability
Tools	Advertising Media campaigns Press releases Print and electronic materials Workshops Toll-free numbers	Polling Focus groups Public meetings Hearings Briefs Workshops Toll-free numbers	Public dialogue Study groups Deliberative polling Citizen juries Search conferences
Uses	Alerting Informing Educating Promoting action Managing issues	Soliciting positions Refining solutions Finding trade-offs among interest groups Managing issues	Listening and learning Surfacing values Synthesizing solutions Understanding trade-offs Prompting action

4. What is public dialogue?

Public dialogue is a tool for citizen engagement developed by Canadian Policy Research Networks (CPRN) in the context of the project *The Society We Want*. Public dialogue:

- Strives to inform policy development with an expression of citizens’ underlying values
- Honours all perspectives and can help to establish common ground
- Uses a highly structured protocol to search for a creative synthesis of perspectives, rather than emphasising the choice to be made among them
- Gives participants an opportunity to listen to other views, enlarge and possibly change their own point of view. Dialogue opens the possibility of reaching a better solution
- Allows citizens to share in responsibilities and locate themselves and their actions in outcomes
- Provides information in the form of a workbook or guide carefully crafted to identify diverse perspectives on an issue, lending a layer of complexity and struggle to the discussion

The companion document entitled, *Public Dialogue: A Tool for Citizen Engagement* details a highly structured protocol that provides a comprehensive step-by-step guide to the conduct of public dialogue sessions.

A public dialogue session brings together a small group of people (eight to ten) who work through an issue statement and a number of viewpoints, usually presented in the form of a guide and distributed in advance. The viewpoints capture several divergent perspectives on the initial issue statement, leading participants to consider the very real tensions that must be reconciled in public policy formulation. The moderator of a group encourages participants to consider and reflect on each viewpoint. Participants are encouraged to place alternative viewpoints on the table for deliberation.

Like study circles, public dialogue requires an experienced moderator, preferably one who has experience working with controversial and complex subject material.

Over the course of a dialogue session, which can last up to three hours, participants move through a discussion that illuminates underlying values and helps identify common ground and specific suggestions to inform policy development. A series of 25 to 50 groups is usually sufficient to elicit the range of public views on a particular issue.

Public dialogue can be used in a multi-stage approach on major policy issues; it can influence policy immediately and over time. “On major issues, it can take a decade or more to change policy. The role of deliberation is to keep that long journey on track and out of unproductive complaining and blaming.”⁷

Public dialogue offers a means to add to the existing knowledge around any given policy issue. It can be used in combination with other research methods, thereby strengthening the quality of information received and of the resulting analysis. Public dialogue is one way to help departments develop advice for their Ministers and contribute to the overall policy-making function.

CPRN is using its public dialogue initiative, *The Society We Want*, in just that way. Having input on the views of citizens is considered an added value that informs the organization’s overall research work. *The Society We Want* is a uniquely Canadian experience with **public dialogue**.

The Society We Want

Initially launched in 1996 by the Canadian Policy Research Networks (CPRN), *The Society We Want* (TSWW) is a highly structured public dialogue process that brings Canadians together to talk on their own terms about the future of their country. It provides a rare opportunity for individuals to engage in dialogue around topics that are important to them. The process is built around a workbook or kit that focuses on a social policy issue of national scope and importance such as the health care system or adapting to the changing world of paid work. The kit puts forward an issue statement, and three divergent perspectives on that issue statement.

After each viewpoint—and any emerging viewpoints—are discussed, the group is asked to put forward “indicators” that would demonstrate that society is moving in the direction they would like to see. Participants are often asked to focus on what their next steps might be, both as individuals and as a group, thus focusing on concrete steps and allowing participants to take ownership of and responsibility for outcomes.

In addition to creating a forum for dialogue, TSWW is also grounded in a sound research methodology. The information from the dialogue is captured on an individual and group basis. Each participant completes a carefully developed research questionnaire, and moderators provide input. All flip charts used throughout the discussion are collected for input to the analysis. These sheets and all feedback forms are returned to CPRN, the non-profit and non-partisan research organization in which TSWW sits, for analysis. The outcomes further inform the work of CPRN and their ongoing input to policy development. Results are shared with participants through a newsletter.

How does public dialogue differ from focus groups and other processes of citizen engagement?

- The format encourages deliberative discussions or “choice work,” wherein participants explore the tensions embedded in different views on an issue.
- The process respects all perspectives as it allows the underlying values of participants to surface and common ground to emerge.
- Information distributed in advance of the group helps provide a context for the discussion and stimulates participants’ thinking.
- It can reach those people or groups most likely to have an interest and the group can be constituted to ensure it is inclusive and reflects the diversity of the Canadian population.
- It asks participants to identify potential indicators of success and to suggest next steps or areas where they would like to initiate changes.

5. Public dialogue—The benefits

To be successful and have meaning, public dialogue depends on strict integrity of process. The tool is to be used in a way that is **transparent**—the options for a given policy decision should be provided—and **accountable**—the organisation conducting the process should commit to a continuing involvement on the part of participants, at a minimum to conveying to them the outcome of the process.

Public Dialogue has a number of unique benefits:

Public dialogue has the capacity to involve many people.

Public dialogue has the ability to reach and involve large and diverse groups of people. First, public dialogue often takes place in a safe and familiar setting—possibly at a public library or community centre—and does not involve public speaking or other activities that some may find intimidating. This makes the process attractive, accessible and inviting to a large cross section of the population. Second, public dialogue need not require a large time commitment on the part of participants; one three-hour session can result in useful and valuable information. Third, any number of public dialogue sessions can happen simultaneously, thus allowing many people to be engaged on an issue within tight time frames.

Public dialogue permits the synthesis of divergent viewpoints.

Public dialogue is a highly structured process where the emphasis is placed on finding a creative synthesis of a number of perspectives, rather than making a choice between them. This reflects the very real complexities that governments face in decision making. Public dialogue does not force participants to make artificial choices or establish “right” or “wrong” answers.

Public dialogue provides for high quality output that can be used to inform policy.

Public dialogue is grounded in a solid research methodology, and citizen input is captured through a number of reporting instruments. This ensures rigorous documentation and analysis, and output with high reliability. Public dialogue allows for reflective discussion that examines the trade-offs among a number of perspectives on an issue, providing for enriched material to inform the policy-making function.

Public dialogue can provide quality input in a “one shot” or an iterative process.

One three-hour public dialogue session can result in valuable and useful information. Public dialogue is also a powerful tool when used in an ongoing and iterative process, given the time and resources.

Public dialogue is complementary to other processes that distil public opinion.

Public dialogue can be used in combination with other processes, such as deliberative polling and can complement other mechanisms that collect citizens’ views. It can be structured to take into account the very complex array of players with which departments and Ministers must work.

6. Other tools for citizen engagement

Search conferences, citizen juries, deliberative polling, study circles and public dialogue are all tools for citizen engagement. All five share the identifying characteristics of citizen engagement processes:

- They provide time and space for in-depth, deliberative discussions that encourage reflection and learning
- They focus on moral choices—not right or wrong answers
- They assume citizens will add value
- The process is supported by factual information
- They can be ongoing processes

Search Conferences

Search conferences were first used in the 1960s as a participatory, strategic planning and community development tool. Search conferences enable a large group to achieve a common vision, mission or mandate. “Typically, twenty to thirty-five people from a community or organization work progressively for two to three days on planning tasks, primarily in large-group plenary sessions. They develop long-term strategic visions, achievable goals, and concrete action plans.”⁸

Search conferences focus on developing a shared vision. The search process is characterized by unstructured dialogue and reflection among participants, providing opportunities for people’s areas of interest and expertise to come together in new and creative ways. Outcomes of the conference are completely undetermined at its outset and might include: ideal futures, short- and long-range plans, mission statements, new programs, increased funding, partnerships, coalitions, innovative solutions, new leadership patterns and a high commitment to action.

Citizen Juries

Citizen juries bring together a small number of randomly selected citizens—or “average people”—to form a jury with the task of rendering a decision on a particular issue or producing recommendations to direct decision making. Jury members call forward expert “witnesses” and then deliberate for a period of time before arriving at their recommendations. The conclusions or recommendations that the jury reaches are considered to represent what any member of the public would put forward if she/he had the time to investigate the issue in some depth.

National Forum on Climate Change, 1998

In Canada, the citizen jury technique was popularized in 1998 with the National Forum on Climate Change. The National Round Table on the Environment and the Economy (NRTEE) brought together a jury of 25 Canadians to create the National Forum on Climate Change. The NRTEE sought to ensure credibility of the process by having the jury composed of a stratified, random sample of Order of Canada recipients, thus differing significantly from the "ordinary citizen" approach of most citizen juries.

The Forum met on February 16 and 17, March 9 and 10 and from April 5 to 7, 1998, in Ottawa. Its deliberations were open to the media and television audiences. The Forum was initially guided by a set of key questions and its overall purpose was to produce a declaration to assist Canadians by providing an objective and unbiased statement of the climate change challenge.

Deliberative Polling

Deliberative polling combines the opinion poll with policy conferences and workshops. A national random sample of citizens is brought together for a short period of time (usually two to three days, but can be as long as seven days) to discuss an issue. At the beginning of the process, participants' opinions are surveyed and participants are provided with materials that have been carefully prepared to present factual information in a non-biased way. Throughout the activity, participants have opportunities to ask questions of experts as well as elected representatives, and to take part in plenary and small-group sessions.

At the conclusion of the process, participants are polled again to determine how their opinions might have changed as a result of their involvement in the process. Like citizen juries, it is felt that these informed views represent "the considered judgements of the public"—the views the entire country would come to if it had the same experience of behaving more like ideal citizens immersed in the issues for an extended period.⁹ O'Hara describes one of the first Canadian experiences with deliberative polling, *Assembly'96*.¹⁰

Assembly '96

In August 1996, the Canada West Foundation, the Council for Canadian Unity, and the Atlantic Provinces Economic Council organized Assembly '96. A random sample of 97 young Canadians were brought together for seven days to discuss Canadian values, the economy, national unity, and representation and participation.

Participants began the assembly by completing a survey and then read workbooks on the issues and listened to some 18 “experts.” They then spent about half the 40 hours of the assembly in workshops, discussing the four issues. At the end they completed a second survey.

In the final survey, almost 80% of participants reported a change in their opinions as a result of the assembly. The summary report of Assembly '96 indicates that of that 80%, 65% said it was their attitudes towards national unity that had changed—support for some type of undefined special status for Quebec grew from under ten% to almost a third. Support for the more familiar “distinct society” increased significantly from 34 to 74%.

Study Circles

Study circles bring together small groups of people to learn about, discuss, deliberate and develop options and preferences concerning a policy issue or set of issues. Study circles require participants to think through trade-offs and choices between a number of policy options and directions. Study circles are most effectively organized by an individual with experience and skills in adult learning, continuing education or community consultation processes, and facilitated by someone experienced in moderating group discussions and dealing with controversial subject material.

Before the study circle is convened, a workbook is sent to those participants who have been recruited or self-selected. Study circles then meet over a period of weeks or months and progress through three phases of a dialogue process: participants reflect on how an issue affects them individually, consider what others say about the issue and, finally, after dialogue and deliberation, identify actions or recommendations.

Sterne describes study circles as “well-tested, practical and effective methods for adult learning and social change; it is small-group democracy in action”—voluntary, informal and highly participatory.”¹¹

The Immigration Policy Review (1994) and the National Forum on Health (1995 - 1996) were two federal consultations with national scope that used study circles as a central part of the public involvement process. Each process was effective in building citizen capacity for deliberation and bringing the public and decision makers together over what are sometimes highly charged and complex issues.

Immigration Policy Review, 1994

Early in 1994, a broad public consultation on immigration was launched, involving bilateral consultation meetings, working groups, workshops, conferences and study circles. Study circles were one of the most important phases of the overall consultation. Throughout the months of June and July; 58 study circles were held in six urban centres across Canada. The study circles were organized by Democracy Education Network, a non-profit, non-government organization. More than 1,100 people participated. Though skeptical at first, people chose to participate because they believed the circles offered an opportunity to speak to the government and to be heard.

The immigration consultation embodied a fundamental characteristic of all effective engagement processes: it engaged organizations and individuals in an iterative and educational process that left many participants with a greater capacity to analyse and make informed decisions about policy issues than they had upon entering the process. It also paved the way for discussion surrounding immigration policy.

National Forum on Health, 1995 - 1996

Between November 1995 and April 1996, discussion groups, also known as study circles, were held in 34 different communities. Interested individuals were asked to register in advance and commit to approximately nine hours of their time, usually over two to three sessions. A private firm was contracted to organize the consultation and endeavoured to work with local community groups to set up the groups. By the end of the first phase, 71 groups had been expertly facilitated, with 1,300 Canadians involved.

In the end, the study circle process used during the Forum illustrated that Canadians are willing to commit a considerable amount of time to policy discussions that are of meaning and value to them. Further, the deliberative technique used in the study circles was successful in generating informed and constructive directions for policy change. Equally important is that participants felt ownership for the proposed directions of the Forum and, as such, realized they had a role to play in implementing the directions and ensuring that the government took action.

7. Conclusion

There is a shift underway in government-citizen relations in Canada and there is pressure for change from all elements of society. The desire on the part of governments and citizens to discover new and more effective ways of working together is apparent. This desire grows from a feeling of disconnection between governments and citizens. Ekos polls indicate that the public believe that the amount of influence they have in shaping society is actually 52% lower than what it should be, while 87% of people asked agreed that the government should place more emphasis on consulting Canadians.¹²

Citizens want more involvement and want to see that their input matters. Citizens are willing to participate, however, only if a number of conditions exist. These include assured listening by decision makers, processes that are representative, and discussion topics that have relevance to their lives.

While departments are encouraged to engage citizens and to devote time and resources to doing so, citizens are wary of consultation exercises that do not genuinely seek their views. Thus governments must be as transparent as possible when seeking public input.

Given the mutual desire on the part of governments and citizens to find new ways to work together, it is clear that public dialogue can become an increasingly important tool for use by government departments and others.

8. Endnotes

- ¹ Abele, Francis et al. "Talking with Canadians: Citizen Engagement and the Social Union." Canadian Council on Social Development, 1998.
- ² Ekos Research Associates Inc. "Rethinking Citizen Engagement." Presentation to the Institute on Governance Citizen Engagement Conference, October 27, 1998.
- ³ Government of Canada. *A Framework to Improve the Social Union for Canadians, an Agreement between the Government of Canada and the Provinces and Territories*. February 4, 1999.
- ⁴ Ibid.
- ⁵ Sterne, Peter. *Public Consultation Guide: Changing the Relationship Between Government and Canadians*. (Management Practices No. 19). Ottawa: Canadian Centre for Management Development, 1997.
- ⁶ O'Hara, Kathy. *Securing the Social Union*. (Study No. CPRN/02). Canadian Policy Research Networks. Ottawa: 1998.
- ⁷ Kettering Foundation. *Making Choices Together: The Power of Public Deliberation*. Dayton: Kettering Foundation, June.1997.
- ⁸ Emery, Merrelyn and Ronald Purser. *The Search Conference*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1996. As quoted in O'Hara, Kathy. *Securing the Social Union*.
- ⁹ Fishkin, James S. *The Voice of the People: Public Opinion and Democracy*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995.
- ¹⁰ Excerpt from O'Hara, Kathy. *Securing the Social Union*.
- ¹¹ Sterne, Peter. *Public Consultation Guide: Changing the Relationship Between Government and Canadians*.
- ¹² Ekos Research Associates Inc. "Rethinking Citizen Engagement."