



Report on CPRN's Dialogue Process  
and Methodology Roundtable  
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Prepared by  
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## **Introduction**

Since its establishment in 1995, CPRN has played a leadership role in public involvement in Canada. In 2002, CPRN made a further commitment to the field with the creation of the Public Involvement Network (PIN). CPRN has been engaging citizens in policy research on a variety of issues important to society. CPRN has now conducted five citizens' dialogues using a deliberative dialogue methodology including *The Quality of Life in Canada: A Report Card*, *The Future of Health Care in Canada*, *a 21<sup>st</sup> Century Social Contract*, *the Ontario Pre-Budget dialogue* and *the Long-Term Management of Used Nuclear Fuel*.

Over the course of these dialogues, CPRN has engaged a number of professional facilitators, who each played a key role as part of the dialogue teams. CPRN and the facilitators recognized the value of reflecting on our collective experiences and sharing what we have learned. In late May 2004, PIN hosted a roundtable with the 10 facilitators and note takers from the two most recent dialogues (Ontario pre-budget and the long-term management of used nuclear fuel). Some of these individuals had participated in several of the CPRN dialogues; others in only one. However, all have extensive experience in engaging citizens to help shape policy or program design, and all share a passion for societal learning and a commitment to dialogue as a valuable means to help improve citizens' lives in Canada and abroad.

## **Roundtable Objectives as Expressed by Participants**

The following points highlight the objectives for the roundtable as noted by participants in the session:

- Review what worked well in terms of the dialogue process and identify areas for improvement;
- Explore lessons learned for framing complex and/or technical / scientific issues for public dialogue;
- Continue to build a community of practice / network of deliberative dialogue practitioners to share and expand knowledge;

## **Participants**

The following people participated in the debrief session:

Diane Abbey-Livingston  
Beth Allan  
Jacquie Dale  
Rod Brazier  
Ray Gordezky

Louise Jauvin (CPRN)  
Pierre LaCroix  
Mary Pat McKinnon (CPRN)  
Judith Nolte  
Ingrid Richter  
Nandini Saxena (CPRN)  
Suzanne Taschereau  
Judy Watling (CPRN)  
Sandra Zagon (CPRN Associate)

## **Summary of Discussion**

Mary Pat McKinnon, Director of the Public Involvement Network (PIN), opened the session by thanking everyone for attending, and noted how fortunate CPRN is to be associated with such thoughtful and dedicated people, who all share a common goal of creating a space for people to think and contribute to public policy, and providing an objective framework to help them think through complex societal issues. She remarked that increasingly, there is a global thirst for engagement. Part of PIN and CPRN's role is to be a catalyst for a change in governance, to allow the wisdom of the public's voice greater prominence in addressing challenging public issues.

PIN is pursuing its work in three principal areas: through practical field work; through research on the effects, quality and impact of public engagement and by improving understanding and developing capacity for engagement (including outreach and networking). This workshop is an important part of this, with a particular emphasis on the quality of engagement.

The following provides a summary of the key points from the roundtable discussion.

## **Dialogue Participation for Building Relationships**

The group discussed the importance of having mechanisms in place to offer opportunities for citizens to engage in an ongoing relationship with decision makers and within communities - from generation of ideas, design of policies and programs to put those ideas in place and implementation to sustain them.

- There was a strong consensus that public participation in dialogue should not be a one-time event, but rather should be seen as the beginning of a new type of relationship between the public and their governing bodies and institutions.
- Decision makers who are the clients or recipients of the outcomes of citizen engagement exercises need to understand the positive impact on

Canadians who participate in deliberative dialogue or other in-depth engagement processes. Participants leave feeling very positive about having had the opportunity and information to contribute. They are empowered by the sense of being part of efforts to improve society. They feel good about their individual and collective contributions. There is some evidence that they are more likely to become involved in their communities and civil society.

- By providing participants with feedback on how their efforts have affected policy decisions, and maintaining an ongoing connection with dialogue participants, decision makers can have a valuable resource from which to seek advice on policy implementation, effectiveness, redesign and so on.

## **Ensure Policy Makers Understand the Dividends of Dialogue**

CPRN was encouraged to make sure clients/ potential funders understand at the beginning of a project all the potential dividends that can result from deliberative dialogue. They need to appreciate the benefits to the participants of each component of the dialogue process and the potential positive impacts on civil society over the long-term, in addition to the direct results of the research.

Likewise, the need for evaluation of the engagement exercise, in terms of impact on citizens **and** on policy decisions, should be encouraged as part of the dialogue design from the beginning of a project, and not seen as an optional add-on at the end. This will not only contribute to sound management of the particular project, but will contribute needed research to knowledge of public involvement impacts.

It was recognized that there will always be a need to balance the dialogue design against the specific circumstances and resources for each project.

### ***Recommendations:***

- *The need to maintain and build a relationship between decision makers and participants should be encouraged by CPRN as an integral part of the engagement process.*
- *CPRN should encourage clients to include evaluation as an integral part of the engagement exercise.*
- *CPRN consider a workshop with its clients to identify common themes across the dialogues to date and discuss the impacts of deliberative dialogue on the policy process and participants.*

## Doing Dialogue Involving Complex, Technical / Scientific Issues

### **Challenges:**

The group discussed the challenges posed by the technical nature of the issues in the Ontario budget and nuclear waste dialogues. In both dialogues, significant time was spent at the beginning of the day providing participants with a great deal of background information (economic data in one case and general information on nuclear waste in the other.) For many participants, it was the first real exposure they had had to most of the information.

In both dialogues, participants' values usually emerged in the morning small group and plenary discussions. In the afternoon, participants tended to provide more depth to the issues that were raised in the morning, but did not drill down into practical implementation of the vision they described in the morning. It was suggested that the morning part of the dialogues were deliberative and focused on closed judgement, while the afternoon part became more like a generative dialogue, to look at ideas and possibilities.

Roundtable participants were referred to Adam Kahane's paper entitled, "*Changing the World by Changing How we Talk and Listen*," (© 2002 Generon) in which he describes four modes of conversation - downloading, debating, reflective dialogue and generative dialogue. The group spent some time considering the different outputs of the various types of dialogue:

**Deliberative dialogue** = output is choice; used to make trade-offs and clarify values

**Reflective dialogue** = output is clarity; used for inquiry, exploring emerging issues; should include cross-section of stakeholders

**Generative dialogue** = output is possibility; used to create new ideas, discover what is meaningful

The group felt that the extent to which dialogue participants stay at the high level of values and general characteristics or get into making specific tradeoffs and choices around implementation of their vision depends on a number of variables. These variables include:

1. The stage of the overall decision making process, and the purpose of the dialogue. It is critical to work with the client to ensure a very clear understanding about what stage they are at in the decision making process and for what purpose they intend to use the dialogue results before designing the dialogue and framing the issues for discussion.

For example, the nuclear waste citizens' dialogue was held early in the analytical process of the Nuclear Waste Management Organization (NWMO), and was intended to identify the values Canadians want to see

reflected in a management approach. NWMO then used these values to help shape the framework they developed to assess the various management approaches, on which they will consult further with the public and others before making a recommendation to the Government. In a consultation held at a later stage of NWMO's process, participants could be provided with information on the advantages and disadvantages of the various options, and therefore would be in a better position to make more choices and tradeoffs.

2. A second variable is the degree of familiarity dialogue participants have with the issue at hand. Is it already part of people's life experiences (e.g. health care) or is it something that has not been prominent in the public domain (e.g. nuclear waste)? Engagement is most obviously meaningful for people when the issue touches their lives and when they feel confident about their contributions. Framing the issues in a way that speaks to people and connects to them at a personal level is critical.
3. It was also noted that in many cases, the dialogue "client" has boundaries or restrictions determined by their mandate or budget that could impact the dialogue design and/or outcomes. It is important to understand these limitations in order that the purpose of the engagement is clear from the outset and to frame the issues in a way that ties the engagement to realistic expectations and outcomes.

### **Recommendations:**

- *Hold a workshop with a representative group of the general public early in the issue framing process, to understand how people connect to the issue at hand.*
- *Use the power of story. In workbooks, present a vignette of the impact of an issue on a person's life (e.g. how certain budget decisions could affect a family struggling to meet mortgage payments) and ask the participant to consider what they would do in those circumstances. Write a personal story as part of each scenario presented.*
- *In the dialogue itself, ask people to share their own experiences in life, and consider spending more time at the beginning of the dialogue session to get people personally engaged and connected to the issue. The opening comments were noted as valuable for this purpose, and the passing of the microphone among participants compared to a "talking stick", and helped to create a sense of community among participants.*
- *Have a thorough understanding with the client about where they are in their decision making process, what outcomes they need from the dialogue (i.e. values, tradeoffs, choices), how they will use the dialogue results, and the*

*boundaries of their mandate or other limitations that could impact the dialogue framing and design. Also, clearly communicate to the client what is possible and realistic, given the client's needs and circumstances.*

## **Information for Dialogue Participants - How Much and How Soon?**

While the beginning of the dialogue session in both the Ontario budget and nuclear waste dialogues was challenging for many participants, they demonstrated they were able to absorb the relevant information and engage thoughtfully with each other in a way that revealed underlying values. They were excited to be part of providing advice to decision makers on issues they had previously felt excluded from. The fact that they were randomly recruited, and were not asked to debate with experts, contributed to making them feel more confident, and comfortable with their role.

However, given the complexity of the issues dealt with, and the amount of background information participants had to absorb, more than one day would be required in order for participants to drill further into specifics. At the same time, it was realized that cost implications and peoples' availability to participate for more than one day would have to be considered and weighed.

The group discussed the advantages and disadvantages of sending background information to participants in advance of the dialogue. In some cases in the Used Nuclear Fuel dialogue, the background package sent in advance seemed to deter some potential participants who felt it was too complex a subject matter. On the other hand, a number of people who participated indicated on their dialogue evaluation form that they would have liked more background information. It was recognized that advance information may encourage some people to harden their opinions before they arrive at the dialogue session, and make the process of listening to each other and learning together more challenging. On the other hand, it was noted that if individuals were so inclined, they could find information on their own and form opinions. The group felt that participants themselves can be networks, and the benefits that come from them sharing information and learning from others supports sending information in advance. They can choose for themselves to read it or not (but a process cannot be designed on the assumption people have done so.)

### ***Recommendation:***

- *When dealing with complex issues, or those that are not familiar to most people, CPRN should consider providing dialogue participants with more substantive background information in advance of the dialogue session. It is key to ensure that the information provided is in plain language and presented in as accessible a form as possible.*

## **Other Recommendations on Dialogue Design**

### ***Facilitation:***

The roundtable group covered a number of issues related to facilitation:

- Facilitators and note takers appreciated the pre-dialogue day-long session to review the workbook and guide, and encouraged CPRN to make this the norm;
- For dialogues dealing with highly technical or scientific topics, consider whether additional preparatory time is required to provide facilitators more technical knowledge on complex issues, to be better able to respond with facts to questions from participants;
- Consider a different set-up of the plenary room, so that the facilitator is not the focal point for the dialogue participants;
- Ensure clarity around the role of the facilitator with any technical experts/observers in the dialogue session.
- Continue using two facilitators with this type of methodology, in order to share workload in managing groups, discerning and recording common ground and differences. A session could be facilitated by one person if necessary, but is not recommended, and additional support would still be required for some tasks.

### ***Note taking:***

Questions were raised about the value of having a person dedicated to taking notes at each session when transcripts are provided.

- Consider the extent to which notes are used for analytical purposes;
- Consider using the resources spent on note taking to provide dedicated support to the facilitator, in recording on flipcharts, passing the microphone, etc.

### ***Small Groups Discussion:***

The effectiveness of the small groups varied considerably across the groups, and even within the same group between the morning and afternoon. A number of points were raised:

- There is experiential learning in having small groups self-facilitate. It also gives them greater control and ownership of the process, while increasing their confidence that their words and ideas will be heard and valued. At the same time, many people don't have the necessary skills or confidence to speak up where some people may be dominating.
- The more technical the nature of the issue being discussed, the more important facilitation is.

- More up-front advice can be given to groups to help them manage; check how things are going 20 minutes into their small group discussion: are they addressing the right questions? Is air-time being shared? Are they listening to each other and capturing ideas?
- There needs to be sensitivity to possible issues such as low literacy, hearing or speech problems.
- Keep small groups at round tables in the plenary room and have facilitators wander among them.
- Consider the feasibility of having the group work in plenary throughout the morning.

### ***Participant Workbooks:***

It was recommended that:

- CPRN seek the advice of adult educators and communication specialists when preparing the participants' workbook, to improve layout, clarity of terminology and use of language;
- Provide all participant materials for the dialogue session in one book; and,
- Ensure consistency of terminology and instructions throughout the material (workbooks, worksheets, pre and post questionnaire.)

## **Conclusion**

CPRN thanked all the participants for their contributions throughout the day and for their advice on the youth dialogue. It was a valuable session, with many good points made that will help to strengthen future dialogue projects.

CPRN intends to post the highlights of the day's discussion on its web-site, so that others can also benefit from the lessons learned.