

# CITIZENS: AN UNDERUSED AND UNDERVALUED ASSET IN THE PURSUIT OF IMPROVED HEALTH CARE DELIVERY

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This article makes a case for why regional health authorities in New Brunswick should give citizens a permanent place at their health policy table. In doing so, it positions citizen engagement within a broader democratic context, connecting health policy development with a call for public participation in democratic renewal.<sup>1</sup>

*Citizen engagement: buzz word, flavour of the month or a movement toward a more democratic way of developing policy and delivering services to Canadians?*

Lately we hear politicians and government officials at all levels, the media and some academics talk about the need for citizen engagement in the design, implementation and evaluation of public policies. However, we should not assume that everyone is using the same definition or are motivated by the same objectives when they call for greater citizen engagement. Ambiguity and lack of clarity about citizen engagement is sometimes the result of spin doctoring, but more often than not, it reflects confusion or misunderstanding about the purpose and parameters of, and requirements for, citizen engagement. The term needs unpacking so that we can have useful discussions about its purpose and challenges and understand what it could mean in our respective areas of policy work.

*What are the main drivers for greater citizen engagement in policy?*

A variety of factors have contributed to rising expectations for greater citizen participation in public affairs, including: declining levels of public trust and confidence in elected representatives

coupled with an erosion of legitimacy for public decisions (reflected in declining voter turn out, especially among the young, and certain ethnic and social groups); a much less deferent, more demanding public that is characterized by higher levels of education; increased access to information; and, growing complexity of policy issues making it impossible for policymakers to have all the answers. These factors apply in spades to health care policy: citizens understand that ultimately - it is the health of each individual that is at the heart of our health system. They know that health care budgets eat up to 50% of taxpayers' provincial dollars. As noted in recent government commissions (Clair, 2000; Fyke, 2001; Premier's Health Council, 2002; Romanow, 2002; Kirby, 2003; Mazankowski, 2003), the public is demanding a larger role in determining the choices that affect the quality and quantity of their health care services - both as individuals and collectively.

*How does citizen engagement differ from public consultation and what makes for good engagement?*

It is helpful to think of public involvement as a continuum, which moves from passive to more active forms of participation. These can be simplified as three distinct (but not mutually exclusive) levels of involvement between public institutions and the public: 1) public communication; 2) public consultation and 3) public participation. The first features unidirectional flows of information from public agencies/governments to the public without opportunities for input or feedback. The second involves the provision of information with a request for feedback. However, it does not usually include formal dialogue or interaction between the two parties. Under the third category, there is a two way flow and exchange between the public and public institutions with some degree of dialogue and deliberation. The opportunities to influence public policy

and achieve more engagement exist under all three types of public involvement, but are much more likely to be realized under the third and to a lesser extent the second level.

We all have a vested interest in ensuring effective and authentic citizen engagement. If citizen engagement is done in bad faith it runs a real risk of fuelling cynicism and possible public backlash. And if it is done poorly it squanders scarce public resources and also leads to public disenchantment. To achieve successful citizen engagement, it is paramount that the sponsors are crystal clear on what they mean by success. They must be able to clearly state why citizens are being engaged and what objectives they are using to determine success. Assuming that this is in hand, research has identified seven key conditions for success:

- 1) representativeness;
- 2) independence;
- 3) early involvement;
- 4) influencing the policy process
- 5) providing information;
- 6) resource availability; and
- 7) structured decision-making.

*What citizen engagement methods and tools are available?*

The toolkit of citizen engagement methods has expanded greatly in the past few decades, especially for deliberative methods (i.e. methods that actively involve citizens and create meaning dialogue between the public and public institutions). The methods include citizen juries, citizen panels, consensus conferences, scenario workshops, deliberative polls, citizen assemblies and citizen dialogues. These methods share a number of characteristics:

- 1) they usually involve small groups of people, often randomly recruited to be representative of their communities;
- 2) there are face-to-face session(s) to deliberate on the issue;
- 3) factual and balanced information is prepared and supplied to participants and professional facilitation is provided;
- 4) experts or resource people are available to support the deliberations and
- 5) a set of recommendations or conclusions are prepared (reflective of the deliberations) and submitted to decision makers.

Increasingly on-line engagement methods are being used by public institutions and while they should not be seen as a replacement for face-to-face deliberation, there are becoming increasingly sophisticated in the capacity to engage the public.

***Citizen engagement and representative democracy: what's the fit?***

It is helpful to discuss citizen engagement within the context of evolving democratic governance, which includes in its ambit public or civic bodies such as the New Brunswick Regional Health Authorities, not-for-profit organizations that deliver services for governments and other innovative regulatory institutions, both compliance-oriented and market-based: The push for greater citizen engagement has been influenced by changing norms of democratic governance that emphasize a more participatory role for the public and a move away from elitist and traditional representational democracy (in which the citizens' role is primarily to elect leaders to represent their interests). It underscores disenchantment with top down, technocratic forms of decision making and reflects the need for complex horizontal policy making to incorporate value-based direction as well as technical expertise. Many of our most vexing public issues arise due to ethical

or values-based dilemmas not technical challenges. Decision makers that absent the public run a risk of failure, especially when the stakes are high and the ground is contested.

According to democratic theorists (e.g., Barber, Bohman and Rehg, Gutmann and Thompson, Habermas), engaging citizens in public policies and affairs fulfills a number of key goals:

- 1) it is a central element of our democracy (normative element);
- 2) it is a way to obtain a specific policy outcome;
- 3) it is a means to contribute to a more engaged and educated public;
- 4) it is means for achieving informed, accountable and legitimate decision-making and
- 5) it is a means to foster trust and reduce conflicts among different stakeholders or interests.

***Citizen engagement applied to health governance***

Abelson and Eyles (2002) have applied this democratic theory framework to health governance and find that involving the public serves four important purposes:

- 1) improving the quality of information by taking into account the public's values, needs and preferences;
- 2) encouraging public discussion and dialogue about the fundamental direction of health care;
- 3) ensuring public accountability for health care processes and results; and
- 4) serving to protect the public interest.

While the health care system has typically relied on more traditional methods of public consultation, recent pilot projects implemented by regional health authorities across Canada offer important insights into successful citizen engagement. New Brunswick regional health authorities may also find other examples such as the citizens'

dialogue done for the Romanow Commission (CPRN, 2002), the consensus conference on xenotransplantation (Einseidel, 2002), and the Citizens' Dialogue on National Public Health Goals (report forthcoming) to be helpful in planning and implementing citizen engagement strategies.

To recap: to be effective, citizen engagement must seek to develop and nurture respectful relationships with the public that are grounded in a belief that citizens have the right to, and are capable of, and willing to, play a meaningful role in their own health governance. And it also makes sense: public engagement can lead to more legitimate and sustainable decisions.

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<sup>1</sup> This article draws on CPRN's citizen dialogues and related research, and several recent papers prepared or commissioned by CPRN, including: *Primer on Public Involvement* (forthcoming Gauvin and Abelson), *Fostering Canadians' Role in Public Policy* (Aucoin and Turnbull 2006); *Assessing the Impacts of Public Participation* (Abelson and Gauvin 2006) and *Restoring Citizen Trust* (MacKinnon and Watling 2006). Visit the CPRN Web site ([www.cprn.org](http://www.cprn.org)) for these and other resources.