
International Association for Public Participation (IAP2) 2006 Conference “Decision Montreal”

By

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Since 1995, Canadian Policy Research Networks has played a leadership role in public involvement in Canada. We bring together policy-makers, academics and practitioners to share knowledge, identify issues and create lasting partnerships. International events such as the International Association for Public Participation (IAP2) conference held in Montreal (November 12-15) provide a venue for public participation practitioners, researchers and decision-makers from around the globe to network and build knowledge on public involvement issues and practices.

IAP2 is an association of members dedicated to making public participation an integral part of the political, economic and cultural life of all nations. It focuses on practical tools and best practices to develop public participation processes. Created in 1990 and based in Denver, Colorado, IAP2 has over 1,000 members in 16 chapters worldwide. IAP2 publishes a semi-annual journal, holds annual conferences attracting over 300 participants, and sponsors an accreditation program with an ongoing training component offered at conferences and through its various chapters.

The 300 plus Montreal conference participants included federal public servants from across the spectrum of departments and agencies, a good mix of provincial and municipal government officials, practitioners, academics, youth, artists, and writers interested in public participation. The conference had a strong international presence with people coming from the United States, Australia, Italy, Nigeria, South Africa, the United Kingdom, Iceland, France, Singapore, Uganda and Thailand.

The conference theme was “Decision,” and provided an opportunity for participants to expand their understanding of the value and benefit of involving citizens at every level of the decision-making process, that is, before, during and after decisions are made. The conference program explored decision-making through a variety of lenses: community-based; national and international public policy decisions; representative democracy and public participation; the role of the media and advocacy in public participation; defining good decisions; and why decision-makers should consider public participation.

Recent research commissioned by CPRN was presented in an interactive workshop “Evaluating Public Participation: From Theory to Practice.” François-Pierre Gauvin, Centre for Health Economics and Policy Analysis, presented the paper he co-authored with Julia Abelson, *Assessing the Impacts of Public Involvement* (available at www.cprn.org/en/doc.cfm?doc=1403). Highlights of his workshop dealt with:

- the importance of contextual factors in public participation processes;
- the importance of the purpose in the design of an evaluation framework; and
- the different evaluation perspectives and what makes a good process (managing expectations).

Among the conference highlights for CPRN was learning about new and innovative ways of including citizens (hard to reach populations in particular) in the decision-making process on very complex and sometimes controversial issues. Of particular interest were the following workshops:

- *Arbitrary Profiling Study Circles Project* (Libby Cable, The Lee Institute; Paul Paskoff, Charlotte Mecklenburg Police Department) examined how a police department in a US community dealt with perceived racial profiling by ethnic minorities;
- *Rebuilding Public Trust through Stakeholder Engagement* (PJ Vankoughnett-Olson and Lorna Tessier, Canadian Blood Services) presented the Canadian Blood Services experience with rebuilding trust from the ground up following the tainted blood scandal);
- *Building Sustainable Decisions through Public Participation: Recent United Nations Experience* (Mary Moreland, Environment Canada, Elisabeth Barot and Dominique Potvin, Canadian Commission for UNESCO), portrayed recent practices in engaging a wide range of actors (experts, youth, general public and elected leaders) in making and supporting sustainable development; and
- *What to do about the Flu: Involving Citizens in Deliberative Decision-Making on Pandemic Preparedness* (Matt Leighneinger, Study Circle Resource Center and Roger Bernier, National Immunization Program) talked of the challenges of connecting citizen voices to complex national policy decisions.

Youth Civic and Political Engagement

Given CPRN’s interest in youth, civic and political engagement, key note speaker Michelle Dagnigo, a young Canadian lawyer and social justice advocate (Youth Action Network,) was particularly inspiring. She spoke about crude stereotyping of youth as either overachievers or gang members whereas the reality is that most young people are neither and are not well served by government programs. She also urged the use of appropriate tools to reach young people (for example, Hip Hop is an effective way of getting youth to discuss issues of consumerism, sexism and racism in schools).

The breakout session *The Truth About Youth: Making Services Better for Youth in Halton* (Tanja Schlabitz, Social and Community Services Department, and Nancy Field, Strategic Planning and Policy Division, Halton Region, Ontario) told the story of a public engagement strategy used to develop a Youth Services Plan to address the growing needs of youth in Halton. The speakers shared their lessons learned and innovative outreach strategies for engaging mainstream, marginalized, at-risk, and hard-to-reach (youth) audiences such as organizing raves with underground local bands and providing transportation to get there.

Australian speakers Darren Cooper and Wendy Sarkissian's inspiring story was part of the plenary community building panel. They spoke about a recent Perth coastal (housing) development project. This project, burdened by a history of betrayal and distrust, was transformed into a sustainable development project which engaged the whole community. Even young children were supported to become active citizens through involvement with scale models, artwork, and a "face painting and questioning" technique in which the facilitator asks children what they would like to see in the project and then paints it on their faces

From small group workshops to large plenary sessions, the message was clear: process matters. Equally important is careful matching of consultation methods to the purpose and the audience. Conference participants shared their tool kits and lessons learned to reach and engage a wide range of citizens and stakeholders. Check the IAP2 Web site, www.iap2.org Conference proceedings will be available in late January 2007.