



## Deliberation forums: a pathway for public participation

Zelma Bone<sup>1</sup>, Judith Crockett<sup>1</sup> and Sandra Hodge<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Charles Sturt University, [www.csu.edu.au](http://www.csu.edu.au) Email [zbone@csu.edu.au](mailto:zbone@csu.edu.au); [jcrockett@csu.edu.au](mailto:jcrockett@csu.edu.au)

<sup>2</sup> University of Missouri–Extension, Email [HodgeS@missouri.edu](mailto:HodgeS@missouri.edu)

### Abstract

Public participation is now required for most governmental decision making in many parts of the Western world. In the USA, one approach to engaging communities in public processes is deliberation. Public deliberation is people coming together face -to-face to talk about a problem that is important, exploring their options and weighing the costs and consequences of their decisions in the context of the views of others. Communities cannot act together until they decide together. Elements to a public deliberation forum include framing the issue so the public can discuss it, convening the process with diverse stakeholders, and having skilled moderators to manage the tensions and conflict that may arise. Examples are presented which discuss how the deliberative process has been used for public consultation in a case in Missouri, USA for the policy area of county land use planning. In Australia, the deliberative approach is being piloted at the community level by Charles Sturt University with a local Catchment Management Authority (CMA) whose charter aims to involve communities in decision-making, seeking to make best use of catchment knowledge and expertise. This paper discusses these efforts.

*Three key learnings:* (1) community participation in public consultation needs to reflect the diversity of stakeholders; (2) the consultation needs to take in to account social, economic, and environmental concerns, and; (3) forums that are inclusive and participatory are more likely to foster action driven by the community.

### Key words

deliberation; forums; participation; community; stakeholders

### Introduction

There is increasing recognition that the public wants, and should have, more of a voice in shaping policy which impacts them, such as health care, environmental quality, reproductive rights, education reform, life sciences, and the like. Since the mid twentieth century, there has been a shift from a more managerial, top-down approach (Luke 1998, p4; Bielele and Cayford 2002, pp2-3) to one where the public is demanding more access to information and more substantive input into policy decisions (Bielele and Cayford 2002, pp3-5). Also supporting this need is the nature of public issues themselves, as they have become more complex and interrelated “crossing jurisdictional, organizational, functional and generational boundaries and are intertwined with other public problems” (Luke 1998, p8). With contentious, complex public issues there may be no one specific public, or group, that can resolve the issue; it requires participation from a number of different publics. Many of these public policy issues are ‘wicked’ and intractable, often with no solution, only temporary and

imperfect resolutions. They have no “narrowly defined technical definitions and solutions and no clear-cut criteria” to judge their resolution (Fischer 1993, pp172-173). Heifetz and Sinclair’s (1988, pp185-187) typology of public problems classifies these wicked, intractable problems as Type II and Type III, where people may not even agree on the problem definition, never mind the resolution. Stakeholders impacted by the issue often hold differing values, beliefs, cultural traditions and worldviews, contributing a social construction to public issues beyond the purview of scientific and technical data. Thus any public engagement processes must address the social construction that influences people’s decision-making.

## **The role of deliberation in public engagement processes**

To date, public engagement processes have not been a panacea. Public officials are aware of the challenges presented by wicked problems, yet many attempts to access public input have not been very successful. In general, public meetings tend to leave people discouraged. One common scenario is meetings dominated by polarised groups of individuals in a scenario of “decide-announce-defend” (Forester 1999, p63). These become futile, adversarial encounters shutting out lesser-heard, yet equally impacted people. Even when public participation is encouraged, it is likely that the community does not lead the process, but rather, it is a top-down “expert-client” approach where knowledge is diffused to communities by experts (Powers and Pettersen 2001).

What is needed is a different approach than the usual ‘us against them’ scenario; an approach which engages the public and encourages them to both to take action and initiate change, and to increase the two-way interaction between policy makers and those impacted by policy (McCoy and Scully 2003, p117; Abelson et al. 2003, p240), without polarizing and shutting down the conversation. Deliberation fills this role. Also called democratic deliberation, it is defined as “to weigh carefully both the consequences of various options for action and the views of others” (Matthews 1999 p110). In addition to the careful weighing of choices, deliberation has several other characteristics (Burkhalter et al. 2002, pp401-404). One is information, with more deliberation occurring if information is accurate and relevant. Another is a range of two, or preferably more, approaches (to prevent polarisation and a simplified yes/no to resolve the issue) which reflect a diversity of perspectives. A third is broadly-shared evaluative criteria for considering solutions and reaching decisions, which takes into account the views of others regardless how divergent. And, finally, deliberation requires participants to apply their evaluative criteria to all the proposed solutions to assess how each of these impacts other stakeholders, and what the likely trade-offs are between the solutions.

Deliberative dialogues build on the capacities of the public to think, talk and act together in their common interests and are designed to produce a change in the way people habitually interact with each other over public issues. The role of face-to-face public engagement cannot be minimised — human relationships are pivotal in public policy issues (Wade 2004, p361; Burkhalter et al. 2002, p400). People come together in a dialogue over the tensions created by conflict in a contentious public issue, which forces them to face what they value. They realise they cannot ‘have it all’ and through deliberation—critical thinking and reasoning—they struggle over values such as “community, faith, responsibility, civic virtue, neighbourliness, stewardship and mutual concern for each other...while living in a free market economy where intrinsic non-market values are not quantified, yet consideration of these values are essential to resolve contentious public issues steeped in value-based choices” (Yankelovich 1999, p202). In deliberative dialogues, when people do not polarise but instead, struggle

together with a contentious issue, they can discover what they share, despite what they don't agree on.

Deliberation differs from debate and dialogue, although dialogue can encompass or result in deliberation. Table 1 illustrates the differences between the approaches. Each has its value when matched appropriately with a public issue and public engagement.

Deliberation is not about winning or losing; it has a different goal. It is about people talking through their personal experiences, their concerns, what they value in regard to an issue as well as the hard facts. Then, making choices about what is important to them, taking into account the values, possibly divergent, of others. The goal is not to change anyone's mind about an issue—this may happen but it may not. People learn they can find common ground and work together on issues in their communities even though they may see the issue from very different view-points.

### **Deliberative Public Forums - Naming, Framing and Taming Public Issues**

There are some essential steps to the deliberative forum process. First, the issue must be 'named' or identified. For example, it is not sufficient for people to say they want to come together to talk about crime. What is it about crime that concerns them - lack of police enforcement? Adults committing crimes? Kids committing crimes? Let's say it is 'kids committing crimes'. Once the topic is 'named', then the next step is to 'frame' it.

Framing an issue lays out a 'schematic' that will encourage members of the public to consider and discuss it (Kettering Foundation 2002). The framing involves creating different 'approaches' or 'options' to resolving the problem or other methods that serve to prompt deliberation. One frequently used method to frame an issue is bringing stakeholders together to explore how they see the problem and what resolutions might need to be considered. However, this is not always possible; Cost, time and scale may impact naming and framing an issue. For example, in a Missouri case (not cited in this paper), the issues were framed in an alternative manner. Forums were being held state-wide and it was not possible to bring all stakeholders together. Instead, health care survey data that had been collected from over 7,000 interviews was used to frame the issue.

**Table 1: Characteristics of Debate, Dialogue and Deliberation**

<b>Debate</b>	<b>Dialogue</b>	<b>Deliberation</b>
Compete	Exchange	Weigh
Argue	Discuss	Choose
Promote opinion	Build relationships	Make choices
Seek majority	Understand	Seek overlap
Persuade	Seek understanding	Seek common ground
Dig in	Reach across	Framed to make choices

Tight structure	Loose structure	Flexible structure
Express	Listen	Learn
Usually fast	Usually slow	Usually slow
Clarifies	Clarifies	Clarifies
Win/lose	No decision	Common ground
Most useful when: A position or course of action is being advocated and winning is the goal.	Most useful when: People want to talk together about something without desiring any particular outcome from the conversation	Most useful when: A decision or criteria for a decision, about the best way(s) to approach an issue or problem is needed.

Framing an issue takes careful consideration. It requires that the tensions associated with the problem be included in whatever approach is used to enable deliberation to occur. What results is called an issue book or discussion guide that presents different, competing ways of dealing with the issue identified. If an issue book is written too simplistically, lacking the tension that actually exists with the issues, then the responses that are developed are often inadequate to induce deliberation. Without tension, there isn't an issue. As an example, consider the National Issues Forum book<sup>1</sup> called *Kids Who Commit Crimes: What Should Be Done About Juvenile Violence* (1992) that frames three approaches for dealing with the children committing criminal acts. One approach is deterrence - get tougher with young criminals. A second suggests addressing moral standards - that families, schools, and the media have abdicated responsibility for teaching right and wrong. And a third is about risk factors, tackling juvenile crime at its roots. In the "*Kids Committing Crimes*" case, any approach alone is insufficient to resolve the problem. In fact, it may take all three or necessitate the design of a fourth approach with aspects of the other three. By designing the issue book so that it reflects the realistic tensions within the issue itself, and without showing a bias towards the approaches, it encourages deliberation because it forces people to make choices about the issue. They consider the action they may wish to take and the consequences and tradeoffs associated with that action.

Once an issue is named and framed, the 'taming' comes in with the public beginning to discuss and deliberate it. At this stage, a forum convener trained in convening public deliberation forums will develop a course of action to bring together stakeholders with differing opinions to participate in the public forum. Moderators, also trained in deliberative methods, lead the forum and begin by setting up guidelines for how the public will interact in the forum—one person speaking at a time, no interrupting, no one dominating the discussion—to ensure that all stakeholders have an equal voice. The moderators, remaining neutral throughout the process, are able to manage the tensions and conflict that may arise while at the same time recognising that tension is necessary to promote deliberation. They encourage everyone to participate and listen respectfully. Guiding the dialogue, moderators pose questions that facilitate deliberation while mitigating opportunities for participants to polarize on issues. Recorders are often present and document what is said for use in reporting out to the public.

## **The role of the authors**

One of the authors, Sandra Hodge, in her capacity as Extension Associate Professor and State Public Policy Specialist at University of Missouri has directed a state-wide program in public deliberation to strengthen the capacity of communities, their citizens and leaders to address controversial public issues. She has provided training to build skills in deliberative decision-making, framing issues for public consideration, and conflict management. As part of this process she had the opportunity to collect data through observation and the forum recording and monitoring stages. Hodge was part of the team engaged in the Saline County example.

The other two authors from Charles Sturt University have completed training in public deliberation and community development with the Kettering Foundation (USA) and University of Missouri. The collaboration between the two universities grew out of this connection and this has led to a joint research program where the authors are investigating the potential of using deliberative forums as a way of improving public engagement in decision-making. The first stage of this research is described in the NSW example.

## **Using public deliberation forums for public engagement: Examples from Missouri and NSW**

Deliberation has been used successfully in a number of public engagement projects both in the U.S.A and internationally in health care (Parkinson 2003), the environment (Booher 2004; Holmes and Scoones 2000; Webler and Tuler 1999), and community and regional planning (Goldman 2004) to name a few. Examples are given below where public deliberation has been used in land use planning in Missouri, as well as a pilot project in a Catchment Management Authority in New South Wales, Australia.

### ***Missouri: Saline County Study Commission***

In the late 1990s, there was concern in Saline County, Missouri over the potential impact of large-scale confinement animal feeding operations (CAFO) (swine) on groundwater and air quality. This was a major challenge for county commissioners because CAFOs are regulated through the U S Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) and Missouri Department of Natural Resources (DNR). Unless something was found amiss in the permitting process, CAFOs could not be excluded from establishing in Saline County leaving the commissioners seeking another barrier to their establishment. One approach used by another county was the institution of a health ordinance that would regulate these entities, in terms of groundwater and air contamination, beyond permits required by EPA and DNR.

At a subsequent public meeting it was discovered, first, that not all commissioners had the same concerns about CAFOs and second, they did have concern over the legal basis for implementing this ordinance. The ordinance was put on hold while more information was sought from the public.

The public engagement process in Saline County took place over three and a half years.

After putting the health ordinance on hold, the commissioners sought assistance from University of Missouri Extension to explore the economic impact of CAFOs, stressing the need for 'knowledge-based' decision-making in regard to the potential for such development. The scope of the knowledge was narrow, focusing on economic impact, with university

faculty deciding what knowledge was relevant. Core issues, such as impact on the cultural and historical assets in the County, and personal and property rights, were not going to be addressed (Powers & Pettersen 2001). This decision erupted into controversy with a number of statewide groups, including conservation and sustainable agriculture interests, questioning the agenda of experts and voicing their opposition to this approach.

Shortly thereafter, University Missouri Extension withdrew leadership from the project, placing the responsibility for the process in the hands of Saline County. The people in Saline County would drive the process and be active co-learners throughout. They would involve the 'experts' when they felt it was warranted. Once the commissioners became comfortable with control of the process, rapid progress was made. A twelve member study commission was chosen locally by the Saline County Commissioners. Different perspectives were represented with gender, geographic and occupational diversity. Members had one-year terms but could renew. It was self-organized and self-directed. This study commission guided the process. People on the commission were committed to the process, with most attending more than 58% of the 38 meetings. Everything that happened was publicly recorded by the appointed secretary of the commission and the secretary also maintained a web page that kept the public informed. A great number of Saline County residents learned computer skills as a result of accessing the web page for information. The local media was involved and reported on all meetings.

Once the study was completed, a draft issue book was prepared which framed the problem and proposed several approaches to addressing the problem of CAFOs and the health ordinance. County residents participated in the framing of the approaches. The issue book was then 'field tested' throughout the county with 17 public forums attended by over 200 people. Each forum had a moderator and a recorder and the notes from each forum were recorded on the community website. The local newspaper attended almost every forum and at least one member of the study commission attended each forum. Comments of participants were incorporated into the final recommendations.

The results from the forums were surprising. The whole process revealed much deeper concerns from the public than just passing a health ordinance to deter CAFOs. The following themes resulted from the public deliberation forums:

- We care about the future of our county
- We are concerned about more regulations.
- We want to be able to vote on any proposed regulations
- We would like to plan our future and not just 'let it happen'.

People realised the critical issue was the future of Saline County's natural resource base, and CAFOs were just a part of this. A final issue book was prepared in February 2000 called "*A Saline County Study: Balancing Our Heritage with Our Horizon*" that focused on land use in the County. It has been used by Saline County in its land use planning efforts.

"Recommendation to the Saline County Commission Regarding Land Use and Future Development in Saline County from the Citizen Steering Committee of the Saline County Study" (<http://saline.missouri.edu/documents/recommendation/recommendation.htm>) was presented on August 30, 2000 and included

- Initiating a Master Land Use plan for the county that would be open to the public;

- Implementing a “Good Neighbour Policy that would set the procedures under which neighbours living within the county, and outside of city jurisdictions, would voluntarily notify surrounding neighbours in advance of his/her action to change land usage in a way that could adversely affect neighbours. The county’s master plan would specify the particular zone (or zones) within which the land uses would be subject to the Good Neighbour Policy. The Good Neighbour Policy should invoke a fair waiting period, after notification, for neighbours to ask questions or to request the assistance of a member of the county’s mediation panel. Such mediator would be chosen based on the mutual agreement of the parties”  
(<http://saline.missouri.edu/documents/recommendation/recommendation.htm#GNP>) and,
- Rejecting the adoption of a county health ordinance to regulate concentrated animal feeding operations (CAFOs) at this time due to a pending court case in another county

There were several unanticipated impacts that resulted from this public engagement process that have built the community’s capacity to engage in public processes. Many of Saline County’s residents learned computer skills through their desire to access information and/or participate by email. A number of community members learned to moderate public deliberation forums and continue to use these skills with other issues today. In fact, the forum process has spread to surrounding counties. And, a Leadership Initiative through Fellowship and Education (L.I.F.E.) program was created to disseminate information and research from the Saline County Study, stimulate community discussion, shape county decision-making and strengthen the Saline County network of Leaders.

### ***New South Wales: Pilot Project with Public Deliberation in a Catchment Management Area***

Catchment Management Authorities (CMAs) are the outcome of recent moves to regionalise governance of natural resources in New South Wales. These authorities have their origins in studies undertaken in the United States (e.g. Morton 2003) which found that government regulation, technical expertise and public tax dollars were insufficient to solve water quality issues involving agricultural runoff and other rural community land use practices. Land and Water Australia (July 2001) also identified that successful Natural Resource Management (NRM) in Australia depended upon engaging a wider range of stakeholders and that NRM problems cannot be considered independently of other dimensions, particularly social. Regionalisation is assumed to provide better outcomes as it allows for regions with geographical boundaries rather than historical or political boundaries; encourages greater community participation in developing plans rather governmental ‘top-down’ policy processes; and allows for better identification and coordination of local issues (Bell 2004).

Indeed, community consultation has long been a policy and legislative requirement for decision-making in NRM, particularly within the regional governance model. However, Lane et al. (2004) identified at least four key areas of concern with the regional governance model. These were:

- Difficulty in defining the region
- Power, conflict and community
- Lack of clear accountability for achieving improved outcomes
- Tensions between technocrats (scientific experts) and community members (democracy).

Thus, merely bringing local interest groups together does not guarantee outcomes that are sound or widely accepted. Some community groups have spent years debating issues from the position of competing interests, leading to polarised stances or stalemates. In other instances consultative processes have been seen to fail because participants were unwilling to make decisions that would impinge on short-term interests. These groups were rarely offered alternative approaches to settling the complex, difficult issues they faced in moving effectively from planning to implementation.

It is apparent therefore that all stakeholders need to be part of the process in identifying solutions to water problems. A community-led model that leads individuals to share as a group in ownership of the problems, is needed to address Lane et. al's (2004) concerns over power, conflict, community and technocracy, overcome the separateness between the social and physical sciences as a barrier to effective NRM (Land and Water Australia 2001, p5) and move towards action in resolution of the problem. Public deliberation is one such community-led model and offers a thorough, comprehensive methodology that a CMA can apply to the problematic tasks of multi-stakeholder decision-making to move more effectively from planning to implementation. The public deliberation process supports best practice in public engagement by providing the CMA with an effective format and structured method for engaging the public in decision-making. It also includes an inbuilt auditing trail that ensures the process is fully documented with the use of moderators and recorders at each forum. Part 1 'Objects of the Act', clause 3(e) of the *Catchment Management Authorities Act 2003* stated, "to involve communities in each catchment in decision making and to make best use of catchment knowledge and expertise". Public deliberation supports this objective by acknowledging that all stakeholders have knowledge and expertise to contribute and encouraging them to share these resources as they work through the decision-making process. Based on these premises, a proposal was put to a CMA that manages natural resource management in catchment areas of New South Wales, Australia. This proposal involved the use of the public deliberation process on critical catchment scale issues.

The expected outcomes of this proposal are:

- The CMA will make a commitment to the funds and time required to conduct a deliberative forum
- The CMA will identify a subcommittee to liaise with the CSU Public Deliberation Project Team
- The CMA, in partnership with the CSU team will identify 'real life' issues/topics to be used as a basis for the forums.

In order for the process to be successful the CMA must decide on the level of authority it is willing to delegate on a particular issue and clearly communicate that judgment to participants. Under the CMA legislation the CMA Board has ultimate responsibility for the decisions made. However, in order to increase trust in the CMA and increase community engagement, the public must have confidence that their input will make a difference. The CMA is considering the proposal. Meanwhile the potential has arisen to work with the CMA in conjunction with a landcare project involving the two CSU authors. In this project, deliberative forums will be used as a pathway for public engagement in the latter half of 2006.

## **Conclusion**

The aim of this paper is to generate discussion and raise awareness about the role deliberation, and public deliberative forums, can play in the public engagement process. While deliberation is not a cure-all, it can make a significant difference in increasing public participation in the areas of clearly identifying issues, developing an approach to discuss the issues, planning for action and decision-making. Deliberation can take into account the wide variety of concerns, expectations and understandings about an issue while bridging the divide which often occurs between communities and agencies or other institutions responsible for public engagement. The practice of deliberation forums is well established in the United States; yet in its infancy in Australia although there are encouraging signs that the deliberative process is being used in various local and state government departments. Potential exists for the use of deliberation in natural resource management to make significant contributions towards decreasing polarisation and increasing public input into policy that impacts people's lives.

## References

- Abelson J, Forest P, Eyles J, Smith P, Martin E, and Gauvin F(2003) *Deliberations about Deliberative Methods: issues in the design and evaluation of public participation processes in Social Sciences and Medicine* (57): 239-251
- Bell S (2004) *Regionalised Governance of Natural Resource Management*, Unpublished discussion paper, The University of Sydney
- BeierleTC and Cayford J (2002) *Democracy in Practice: Public Participation in Environmental Decisions*. Washington, D.C. Resources for the Future
- Booher D (2004) Collaborative Governance Practices and Democracy in *National Civic Review*. Winter: 32-46
- Burkhalter S, Gastil G and Kelshaw T (2002) A Conceptual Definition and Theoretical Model of Public Deliberation in Small Face-to-Face Groups in *Communication Theory* (12:4): 398-422
- Fischer F (1993) Citizen Participation and the Democratization of Policy Expertise: From Theoretical Inquiry to Practical Cases. *Policy Sciences*, 26: 165-187
- Forester J (1999) *The Deliberative Practitioner*. The MIT Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts
- Goldman J (2004) Listening to the City: Casting a Spotlight on the Growing Movement for a More Deliberative Democracy. *Group Facilitation: A Research and Applications Journal*, Vol. 6; 4-12
- Heifetz R A and Sinclair R M (1988) Political Leadership: Managing the Public's Problem Solving. *The Power of Public Ideas* (R.B. Reich, Ed.). Cambridge, MA: Ballenger Publishing
- Holmes T and Scoones I (2000) Participatory Environmental Processes: Experiences from North and South. IDS Working Paper No.113. Institute for Development Studies, Sussex, UK
- Kettering Foundation (2000) *Framing Issues for Public Deliberation: A curriculum guide for workshops*. Dayton, Ohio

Land and Water Australia (2001) *Natural Resource Management: People and Policy*, Land and Water Australia, Canberra, July

Lane M, McDonald G T and Morrison T H (2004) Decentralisation and environmental Management in Australia: a Comment on the Prescriptions of The Wentworth Group. *Australian Geographical Studies* 42 103-115

Luke J (1998) *Catalytic Leadership: Strategies for An Interconnected World*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass

Mathews D and McAfee N (2002) *Making Choices Together, The Power of Public Deliberation*. Charles F. Kettering Foundation, Dayton, Ohio

Matthews D (1999) *Politics for People*. Urbanna, IL: University of Illinois Press

McCoy M L and Scully P L (2002) Deliberative Dialogue to Expand Civic Engagement: What Kind of Talk Does Democracy Need? *National Civic Review*, (91:2): 117-135

Morton L W (2003) "Civic Watershed Communities" in *Research in Rural Sociology and Development*, (9): 121-134

Parkinson, J. 2004. Why Deliberate? The Encounter Between Deliberation and New Public Managers. *Public Administration* (82:2), 377-395.

Powers R C and Pettersen W (2001) *Saline County Study: A Case Study of Community-Based Decision Making*. Proceedings, 33rd Annual Conference of the Community Development Society, Duluth, MN

Wade S O (2004) Using Intentional, Values-Based Dialogue to Engage Complex Public Policy Conflicts. *Conflict Resolution Quarterly*, (21:3): 361-379

Webler T and Tuler S (1999) Integrating Technical Analysis With Deliberation in Regional Watershed Management Planning: Applying the National Research Council. *Policy Studies Journal* (27:3): 350-371

Yankelovich D (1999) *The Magic of Dialogue: Transforming Conflict into Cooperation*. New York, Touchstone Press.

<sup>1</sup>National Issues Forums (NIF) a nonpartisan, nationwide network in the United States of locally sponsored public forums uses issue books for the consideration of public policy issues. NIF is rooted in the simple notion that people need to come together to reason and talk, to deliberate, about common problems. These forums, organized by a variety of organizations, groups, and individuals, offer citizens the opportunity to join together to make choices with others about ways to approach difficult issues and to work toward creating reasoned public judgment ([www.nifi.org](http://www.nifi.org))

