

Opening Dialogue, Opening Minds: Encouraging citizen engagement

Introduction

We live in an era of rapid change, and to many people our society seems increasingly fractured and fractious. Globalization and the complexity of related social and economic issues seem to be leaving many people feeling ‘sidelined’ – powerless to influence decisions that affect their lives. While international meetings become violent showdowns between pro- and anti-globalization forces, the average citizen often is left feeling alienated and confused. While policy researchers debate indicators of declining social cohesion and social capital, voluntary organizations are struggling to engage the public in community-building.

For organizations concerned with international issues, the challenge of engaging the public is even greater. Canada’s economy and environment are influenced increasingly by what goes on outside our borders, but few Canadians make the links between local and international issues. As global citizens, Canadians need to understand, and have a say in, international issues and decisions that affect communities both here and abroad. Unfortunately, most are turned off by policy debates between ‘experts’

who argue from time-worn ideological positions and by newspaper editorials that are predictably ‘right wing’ or ‘left wing.’ Seeing little that relates to their own experiences, many people simply ‘tune out’ – although at the same time they are indicating, through polls and other studies, that they want the opportunity to be heard.

The Canadian Council for International Co-operation (CCIC) is making a special effort to engage the public in meaningful discussion of international policy issues. As part of this effort, CCIC has been developing, testing and expanding use of the process known as ‘deliberative dialogue.’ This technique has shown promise as a means to involve Canadians in learning and talking about issues and policies that affect them.

What is deliberative dialogue?

Deliberative dialogue, or public deliberation, is a technique to engage citizens in discussions of public policy. It was pioneered by the National Issues Forum and the Kettering Foundation in the United States, and used also by Canadian Policy Research Networks in its ‘The Society We Want’ project in the mid-1990s. The

technique involves bringing together individuals from a variety of backgrounds and viewpoints to work through different approaches to dealing with an issue – or ‘choices.’ There are generally three or four such choices – never only two polarized alternatives.

The choices are based on careful research and ‘issue framing,’ and are designed to reflect the ways that most people seem to view the issue. The choices are spelled out in a participants’ guide, which presents the strengths and weaknesses of each in a balanced way. The choices are not mutually exclusive. Each approaches the issue from a different perspective based on different core values, but none falls into typical ‘left’ and ‘right’ positions. Most people will find some aspects of each choice to be positive and other aspects to be negative.

Issue framing and the creation of balanced choices are critical to the success of public deliberation. The purpose of deliberation is not to steer people towards a particular point of view. It is to enable them to understand and relate to a complex issue and to consider a variety of options.

In a typical deliberation forum of three hours, a group of anywhere from 10 to 25 people deliberates the different approaches with the assistance of a trained moderator. The emphasis is on mutual respect, sharing of opinions and building on the perspectives of others, rather

than on debate or attack. A ‘recorder’ observes the deliberation and listens for points of agreement. At the end of the deliberation, the recorder reviews the findings from the deliberation with the group to see if there are any points of general agreement – any common ground that can form the basis for further action on the issue. Following the identification of common ground, participants are asked to identify next steps that should be taken to build on the results of the deliberation – including steps that individuals can take and recommendations for broader action.

Jacquie Dale, who has spearheaded the deliberation research of CCIC, notes another important point: “People do not need to be experts to participate in a deliberation, because deliberation is ultimately about values.” The participants’ guide provides background information and, with the assistance of skilled moderators, individuals can rapidly make the connections between an issue such as globalization or poverty and their own experiences. Unlike the polarized debates that characterize so much of public discussion on policy issues, deliberation provides a chance to explore approaches, test ideas and consider grey areas. It can help people break away from habitual viewpoints and consider new options.

The word ‘deliberation’ sounds calm and unemotional: In fact, deliberations can be intense and passionate. Jacquie notes: “In a successful deliberation, participants must face up to the contradictions and long-term consequences of their opinions, and make choices. This can be a very difficult process. By working through the conflicts and tradeoffs associated with an issue, people clarify what is most important to them, improve their understanding of the issue and may find common ground from which alternatives can develop. Any common ground that does emerge represents a more considered public judgment than the top-of-mind opinions collected through surveys and polls.”

The Canadian Council for International Co-operation is a coalition of more than 90 Canadian nonprofit organizations that seek to change the course of human development in ways that favour social and economic equity, democratic participation, environmental integrity and respect for human rights. The *in common* campaign of CCIC members aims to make action against poverty a public and political priority.



Near the end of a deliberation in Winnipeg, the 'recorder' summarizes points of apparent common ground for final consideration by participants.

Deliberation provides an opportunity to consider complex issues in more depth than is allowed by typical public consultation processes. "A few public service ads or public meetings are not sufficient to engage the public in complex issues," says Jacquie. "Policy-makers may spend years working on an issue, and then get impatient if citizens don't quickly come to a decision about it. Members of the public also need time to work through difficult issues: Deliberation provides a way to help do this."

Tracking of results is an important part of deliberation. Common ground is recorded and a questionnaire is administered before and after each session. Participants are asked to indicate their level of agreement or disagreement with various statements. Many of these statements are the same on the pre-forum and post-forum questionnaires: A key intention is to see if participants change their views as a result of the deliberations. In many cases, they do. The genuine dialogue that takes place in a good deliberation encourages people to rethink their views – and their opinions of others' ideas.

Grappling with globalization

In 1998, CCIC conducted a pilot project involving several public deliberations in Ottawa on the issue of poverty. Funding for this project was provided by the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA) and the International Development Research Centre (IDRC). The results of these deliberations were sufficiently promising that, in late 1998, CIDA and IDRC provided funding for a larger pilot project to conduct deliberative dialogues in several regions of Canada on a new topic.

Discussions with CCIC staff, member organizations and others indicated that there was a strong need for better public understanding of globalization and its implications, and the decision was made to focus the new round of deliberations on globalization. Several CCIC member organizations were selected to run the dialogues 'on the ground': the Centre for International Studies at the University College of Cape Breton; *l'Association québécoise des organismes de coopération internationale*; the Mani-

toba Council for International Co-operation; and The Marquis Project, a nongovernmental organization in Brandon, Manitoba.

The project was developed well before the ‘Battle of Seattle,’ and there had been little public discussion of globalization. The challenge was how to frame such a complex issue for deliberation. After extensive research, interviews with people from many walks of life and focus group testing of the issue framework, a draft participants’ guide was developed. To ensure that it presented the choices in a balanced way, the guide was reviewed by a variety of organizations with different perspectives, including the regional partners, Canadian Policy Research Networks, the Alliance of Manufacturers & Exporters Canada and the Business Council on National Issues. It also was tested in pilot deliberation forums in Sydney NS, Winnipeg and Montreal.

The final deliberation guide included three choices for Canada. ‘Strengthen local communities’ emphasized the need to protect Canada’s quality of life and buffer ourselves from the effects of globalization by focussing on the local. ‘Compete globally’ argued that we can maintain our standard of living only by competing on global markets, and that this requires better skill development, lower taxes, less debt and less expensive social programs. ‘Build a fairer global economy’ was based on the premise that new rules are needed to ensure that the benefits of globalization are distributed more fairly and that the negative effects are minimized.

The regional partner organizations did considerable outreach to involve people from varying perspectives in the deliberations, including youth, business people and members of minority ethnic communities. CCIC provided two-day training sessions for moderators in each of the participating regions. Ultimately, more than 30

deliberations involving more than 400 people were held from March to June 1999.

Changing views of others’ views

Through deliberation, members of the public were able to engage with the complex issue of globalization. Although there were many disagreements, participants did arrive at some common ground. They deeply valued fairness, community relationships, citizen participation in decisions that affect them and protection of the natural environment. They accepted that globalization is a reality: Although supporting the need to strengthen local communities, participants rejected ‘isolationist’ aspects of the first choice. However, they were concerned about some of the directions that globalization is taking. Deep concerns were expressed about the increasing gap between the rich and the poor, and about imbalances in the economic playing field.

In comments and questionnaire responses, participants revealed that deliberation had caused them to question their views and advance their thinking. Although they did not always change their minds, they had a better understanding and appreciation of opposing viewpoints. Overall, 96 percent of participants who completed questionnaires changed their responses on at least one question between the pre-forum and post-forum questionnaires.

In general, opinions were most volatile around issues related to the role of corporations in the economy. Opinions changed least about issues of equity, such as the gap between the rich and the poor. Concern was high about this gap, and remained high.

A telephone survey of a sample of the deliberation participants, three months after their participation, provided some insights into



A final event in Cape Breton, where participants attempted to build on the common ground from their community deliberations.

the longer-term impact of the deliberative dialogues and the firmness of opinions. For nearly a fifth of respondents, the deliberation did have a longer-term impact on behaviour – they indicated without prompting that they now made more of an effort to shop locally or buy fair trade products, or were more concerned about the environmental and labour records of companies.

The purpose of deliberation is not simply to engage the public in consideration of issues. It is vital that the ‘considered public opinion’ that emerges from a series of deliberative dialogues be communicated to policy-makers. It is also important to reflect back to participants the findings from the process. CCIC produced several newsletters for participants and a final report that summarized the results of the globalization deliberations. It distributed the results of the pilot project widely to its members and other participants in the *in common* campaign, and to decision-makers. CCIC and local organizers provided summaries of the findings to Members of Parliament and Senators from participating regions, as well as to members of Parliamentary committees concerned with issues of foreign policy, globalization and public participation.

Youth forum echoed concerns

To further test the deliberation technique, CCIC organized a three-day National Youth Forum on Globalization and the Future of Work in May 1999. A diverse group of 31 young people from eight provinces participated; most had previously taken part in the globalization deliberations. The Youth Forum offered an opportunity to build on the common ground of the globalization deliberations and to delve more deeply into related issues using a new participants’ guide on globalization and the future of work.

Many concerns that emerged from the youth forum were similar to those that surfaced in the community deliberations. There was virtually unanimous agreement on the importance of environmental sustainability – this was the strongest common ground. Another theme that came out very strongly was the importance of citizen participation. There was also considerable concern about gaps between the rich and the poor, the impact of globalization on opportunities for education and work, and corporate accountability and responsibility. Education about globalization was identified as another priority.

Participants in the youth forum had opportunities to share their concerns with decision-makers. Part-way through the forum, they travelled to Parliament Hill to meet with a panel of four Senators and Members of Parliament from different political parties. On the final day of the forum, the young people presented the common ground from their deliberations to the Annual General Meeting of CCIC.

“It is amazing to see how much you don’t know about what is happening in the world around you, even in your own community or country. It is a very good environment ... to delve deeper into the issues.”

Comment from a participant in a public deliberation in Winnipeg.

Strengths and weaknesses

An evaluation of the CCIC pilot project by national and regional organizers identified a number of strengths of deliberation as a technique to encourage public engagement:

- *Diversity of perspectives and opportunity for reaching new people:* Deliberation encourages a variety of perspectives, and the globalization deliberations provided an opportunity to engage people who had not previously been interested in international development issues. One organizer noted that “the public space created for diversity is a welcome change from ‘preaching to the converted’ kind of meetings.”
- *Emphasis on experience:* The results of the pilot project underscored that people do not have to be experts to participate in a deliberation because, at heart, deliberation is about values. Even people with little knowledge of globalization could understand the tradeoffs between supporting local small businesses and shopping at cheaper big-box stores, for example.
- *Issue framing and guide:* Framing a difficult issue into several choices provided a context in which people could explore different points of view without falling into time-worn positions. Organizers found that this issue framing helped people make the connections

between local and global issues, and look at local issues with fresh eyes.

- *Enjoyable public space and safety of discussion:* The pilot project revealed that many people are hungry for dialogue and value the public space opened up by deliberation. Many participants appreciated the fact that the deliberations gave them a chance to discuss issues with fellow citizens from a variety of backgrounds, whom they would not normally encounter. The nonconfrontational structure and professional moderation of the deliberations enabled individuals to express their opinions even when they knew others would disagree. Organizers found that by encouraging people to rethink their views, deliberation can open up new opportunities for dialogue between people who may have stopped listening and talking to each other. This was particularly noted in smaller communities.

Of course, deliberation is not a cure-all. The pilot project identified weaknesses that need to be addressed if deliberation is to realize its potential:

- *Lack of time to address hard choices and tradeoffs:* An important purpose of deliberation is to push people to think through the consequences of their choices. It became clear that, for a complex issue like globalization, a three-hour session does not provide enough



A panel of participants presents the common ground from the National Youth Forum to the CCIC Annual General Meeting.

time to do this thoroughly. In cases where groups did deliberate tradeoffs more deeply (such as for the issue of ‘buying locally’), questionnaire results showed a greater net shift in opinion. These results suggest that when people have enough time to address tradeoffs in depth, deliberation can affect and advance their thinking.

- *Level of research and other support required.* Development of a good deliberation guide requires considerable research and careful framing of the issue to be discussed. For moderators, hands-on training and access to advice and mentoring from more experienced people are vital. Deliberation is a resource-intensive process.
- *Verbal, intellectual nature of the process.* The deliberation process works best for people who are comfortable with verbal expression and with reading a deliberation guide. The challenge is to involve those who are less comfortable with a highly verbal process, and to present issues simply without being simplistic.
- *Need for effective utilization of the results.* Decision-makers need to be open to the ‘considered public judgment’ that emerges from deliberations. However, there are seldom obvi-

ous processes or ‘doors’ through which the information from deliberations can be effectively channelled. In designing a deliberation process, it is very important to think about how the results can, should and will be used. Otherwise, the ‘considered public judgment’ may end up gathering dust on a shelf. It is also crucial that proponents of public dialogue work together with government to find better ways for public judgment to be incorporated into policy processes.

Looking ahead

The Canadian Council for International Co-operation is continuing to study and test the deliberation process in an attempt to address these issues. With financial assistance from CIDA, the Council is now embarking on a three-year project to undertake deliberative dialogues on at least two policy issues in various parts of Canada. More than 1,000 people are expected to participate in these dialogues. “We plan to broaden the deliberations geographically,” says Jacquie Dale, “and we also want to find ways to build on the common ground aspect so that deliberations can really help to move issues forward.” This

“The chance to freely express my opinions with people I wouldn’t normally interact with was quite enlightening.”

Comment from a high school student who participated in a community deliberation in Sydney, Nova Scotia.

may involve experimenting with more in-depth techniques such as ‘study circles’ – a series of dialogues involving the same participants – to try to deepen the discussion and develop more concrete recommendations for future action.

The Council also has formed a separate for-profit organization, *One World*, to provide deliberation and consultation services to a variety of clients. Elsewhere, the technique of deliberative dialogue is being used more widely as other organizations build on the experience of the Council’s pilot project. In 2000, the Atlantic Council for International Co-operation organized sessions in the Maritime provinces on globalization. The Cooper Institute has conducted deliberations in PEI on poverty issues. In early 2001, with funding from CIDA, the Atlantic Council applied this public engagement process to the issue of climate change, organizing six deliberations throughout Atlantic Canada. At a conference in March, the results were consolidated and fed into a position paper on climate change.

The Marquis Project in Brandon has been applying some of the techniques of deliberation – particularly issue framing – in work with youth. In April 2001, 100 student leaders from across Manitoba participated in a Youth Town Hall in which they framed issues of concern to them – including education, environmental issues and racism. The students then questioned provincial cabinet ministers on the issues. The Manitoba Council for International Co-operation also has been working with youth, conducting delibera-

tions on globalization in Winnipeg-area schools. The Council also has organized two-day forums for students that included visits to industries that may be affected by globalization.

The momentum of public deliberation continues to grow. As a result of the projects of CCIC and other organizations, there is now a network of more than 150 people who have been trained as moderators and recorders for public deliberation sessions. CCIC’s deliberation work also has caught the eye of policy-makers. In November 2000, Jacquie Dale was awarded the Suzanne Peters Citizen Engagement Award at the National Policy Research Awards.

“Governments and NGOs alike are struggling to find effective ways to involve citizens in decision-making,” says Jacquie Dale. “Public deliberation is one tool that can be used to gather meaningful citizen input on complex issues, be they local, national or international. Ultimately, most public policy decisions are about values – and deliberation is good way to reveal the values that citizens hold dear.”

Ann Simpson

Ann Simpson works on the ‘community stories’ series for the Caledon Institute.

For more information on CCIC’s public deliberation work, check the website at: <http://fly.web.net/ccic/volsector.htm>, or contact Jacquie Dale at (613) 241-7007 (jdale@ccic.ca).

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