

CHAPTER 26. THE NEXT CHALLENGE FOR CITIZEN ENGAGEMENT: INSTITUTIONALISATION

Carolyn J. Lukensmeyer, Ph.D, President and Founder, AmericaSpeaks

The value of citizen engagement: the example of New Orleans

Two years after Hurricane Katrina devastated New Orleans – decimating the city’s infrastructure and exposing deep racial and economic disparities – the city remained without a recovery plan to guide rebuilding efforts and leverage government recovery funds. Early planning efforts were met with anger and protest as the community struggled to distribute resources and revive an entire city in an environment where the public’s trust in government had been severely abused.

In December 2006, thousands of current and former residents of the city were invited to an unprecedented Community Congress that took place at 21 meeting sites across the United States (half of the residents of New Orleans had not yet been able to return home.) More than 2 500 people, representing the demographic diversity of pre-Katrina New Orleans, took part in the deliberative forum. Linked together by satellite and the Internet, residents struggled with the tough choices facing the city and articulated a set of collective priorities for rebuilding their home city.

One month later, 1 300 people came back together to review a recovery plan that had been developed based on their priorities. Support for the plan was overwhelming; ninety-two percent of participants agreed that the plan should move forward. For the first time, community leaders had a public mandate to act. Building off this support, the city’s recovery plan was soon approved by the city and the state and has begun to be implemented.

Whether you look to this experience in New Orleans or the countless other examples that have occurred around the world, the value of authentic citizen engagement has become abundantly clear. The issues that confront all of us in the 21st century can no longer be dealt with by government, or the private sector, on their own. To find and implement sustainable solutions to our most urgent problems, the public needs a seat at the table.

The good news is that after decades of experimentation and research, we know a remarkable amount about what works; about what it takes to convene diverse groups, to support informed deliberation, and to position public discussions so that they can make an impact. Citizen Assemblies, Participatory Budgeting, Citizen Juries, Deliberative Polling and 21st Century Town Meetings work. They have proven track records and are being used around the world.

Finding ways to institutionalise deliberative practices

The sobering challenge before us is to take these practices that have been employed episodically and find ways to institutionalise them. The way the public’s business is done needs to become more inclusive and participatory as standard practice, especially at the national level. Only by institutionalising these practices will we rebuild trust in our governing institutions and transform what it means to be a democracy.

More so than almost anywhere else, Europe is home to a wide and deep set of cases where government has actively sought to bring the public into the governance process. For example, the European Union has invested substantial resources into experiments with public participation and electronic governance. Great strides have also been made in Britain recently to provide citizens with opportunity to be involved at the local and national levels.

Unfortunately, however, successful examples of the institutionalisation of public deliberation are few and far between. The Danish Board of Technology has served as a mechanism for soliciting public opinion on critical issues in Denmark for more than a decade. Participatory budgeting has enabled tens of thousands of Brazilians to shape local budget priorities since the early 1990s. In the United States, most institutionalised participation is limited to small communities, like the New England Town Meeting. A proposal to create regular national discussions was recently made by a major candidate for the Presidency, but such an idea remains just a proposal.

In order to meet the challenge of institutionalisation, it will be critical to raise the visibility of the successes that have been achieved at engaging the public in governance in order to recruit more advocates to the cause of open and inclusive policy making and build a constituency for the policy reforms that must be put in place. Only when people understand what is truly possible will there be a great enough demand to realise our goals.

We must also do more to fully conceptualize the infrastructure that will be required to sustain participation over time. Embedding public involvement and deliberation into the policy making process will require a host of formal policies and institutions. But, it will also require shifts in the culture of our communities and the creation of informal organisations to educate the public and ensure that the public process maintains its vitality. The time to begin to comprehensively think through what this infrastructure will look like is now.

As we work to transform our governing institutions and practices, it will be critical that we remain aware of the failings of past reform efforts. We must write into the legislative statutes that authorise these mechanisms processes of cyclical review to ensure that they remain evergreen. At the same time, we must create safeguards to prevent these new venues for public voice from being captured and co-opted by special interest groups.

The global movement to create open and inclusive policy making has come a long way over the past decade. Opportunities to transform our governance processes that I never thought I would see in my lifetime now seem to be within our reach. It is truly an exciting time for those of us who care deeply about the state of democracy. I am hopeful that in the coming years we will all have a chance to experience democracy as it was envisioned so many years ago; as a government of the people, by the people and for the people.