

Checklist for Evaluating Community Engagement and Public Decision-Making Regarding Complex Public Issues

Why do our well-intentioned efforts to build community capacity and take action on the public issues we care about often end in frustration and vague or limited success? One reason is that we often do not create a structure for community engagement that supports the type of thinking and weighing out of alternatives that are needed to deal with the complexity of most public issues. Complex issues require processes that create and support a much different kind of interaction among citizens than provided by our usual ways of talking together in public. When communities are faced with making decisions and taking action on complex public issues, it is essential to use processes designed to support meaningful deliberation and decision-making. (For a fuller elaboration of different forms of public interaction see *The Scale of Public Interactions SPI* [HYPERLINK "http://www.integrativelearninginstitute.com/spi"](http://www.integrativelearninginstitute.com/spi) www.integrativelearninginstitute.com/spi.) These processes require a much greater degree of commitment, time, structure, and focus. They potentially can assist communities or organizations to:

- identify and agree on the specific issue of concern
- understand how and why the issue has become problematic
- consider the perspectives of all of those impacted by the issue
- deliberate and decide upon multiple actions to respond to the issue

The following checklist identifies essential questions citizens, facilitators, policy makers, and elected officials can be asking to see if the public engagement process they are planning to use will produce the outcomes they wish to achieve.

Is this a simple issue or a complex one?

If it is simple, a yes or no response will suffice. If it is complex, as in involving many aspects, relationships, perspectives and implications, then it cannot be quickly addressed in a few short meetings, or a yes or no vote as this will leave out too many essential ingredients and likely result in partial and therefore unsatisfactory responses, and potential frustration and even sabotage.

Is there a common understanding on what is being talked about?

Often we gather to talk about big general topic issues (such as crime, pollution, development proposals, climate change or affordable housing) with the assumption that we are all talking about the same thing. Within these big topics are many subtopics and differing values, needs, assumptions and experiences regarding these subtopics, which need to be surfaced so we do not get lost in generalities and talk past each other.

Is the issue seen in relation to the context and causes surrounding it?

Issues seldom occur in isolation from other situations in a community or organization. It is helpful to see the connections between issues and how some issues cause other issues. This helps us see what are the ‘tip of the iceberg’ topics and what are the root causes. Working on root causes will create comprehensive and sustainable change whereas focusing on ‘tips’ can feel like band aid interventions.

Has adequate preparation time, structure and facilitation been arranged to support people to respond to the issue?

Problematic issues are made up of layers of complexity. Public processes used to respond to these issues need to consider these layers in order to be effective. A process, which has clearly structured progressive steps, allows for the complexity to be less overwhelming and for the outcomes to be more effective. Intractable problems such as poverty or water quality need this kind of systemic approach.

Is there a way to help participants to move beyond looking for quick fix single solutions?

If people come to meetings expecting to resolve things quickly, there will be a lot of frustration if they do not see action and results soon. This frustration often pushes people to become reactive. Quick reactive responses though are not likely going to resolve chronic issues that have been developing in communities over a long time. When people can use a process by which they see the layers of complexity comprising the issue, they may be more willing to let go of ‘magic’ thinking and commit to taking the progressive steps needed to effectively respond to complex issues.

Do participants know how this issue became problematic, and why it has become so difficult to change?

To assist communities to effectively address an issue requires preparatory work. The issue did not fall out of the sky but has a history, which participants can piece together by sharing their own experiences and by seeking helpful expert information when needed. Complex issues become embedded in a history of attitudes, behaviors, policies, and social structures which have developed over time and need to be addressed ‘to get’ at the issue. This preparatory work requires a different process than just having a one shot open house or town hall meeting to ‘inform’ the public, which, unfortunately is often a common assumption in many “public involvement” processes.

Do participants know what the question is they are trying to answer?

Often people head into meetings to advocate solutions but have not identified or agreed on the question they are trying to answer. Developing clear agreement on a focus question will ensure clearer decisions. Murky questions leads to murky responses. Presenting a question to the public invites inquiry into different possible options, whereas advocating a single solution often stimulates reactive stances instead

Are biased solutions hidden in how ‘questions’ are presented?

Even though presented as a question for open public consideration, issues often contain assumptions or diagnosis about what the problem is, and jumps to what “the” solution should therefore be. Examples:

a) Question “*How do we make sure unruly teenagers respect parents advice?*” Assumed or Diagnosed Problem : *teenagers are unruly* — Leads to a solution bias: *respecting parents will fix the problem.*

b) Question “*How do we attract developers to invest in our downtown core?*” Assumed or Diagnosed Problem: *investment is needed in the downtown core* — leads to a solution bias: *create incentives that attract investors.*

Solutions posing as questions often show up in convoluted referendum questions wherein

people takes sides on a solution without defining what the multiple questions are that are likely underlying the big topic issue.

Stakeholder involvement: have the perspectives of all those involved been included?

‘Stakeholders’ include those who are impacted by the issues, might be impacted if there was a change in the issue, or have influence, responsibility, and/or resources to change the issue. People will hold various perspectives about how the issue is problematic and what actions could be taken to address it. Including all these diverse perspectives is necessary to generate the comprehensive understanding and multiple responses required to deal with complex issues.

Who are the “decision makers” considered to be?

Are decision makers defined as just elected officials, or only certain sectors of the community or do they include all of those impacted by the decision? Often ‘public involvement processes’ refer to methods by which formal leaders offer information to the public, gather responses regarding that information, and then make policy decisions amongst themselves. That process creates a different climate and outcome than one which considers that all of those impacted by the decisions are the decision makers. Representative democracy works best when such community engagement processes are used. What is needed is a process that includes a well-planned structure to enable community residents and elected officials to bring their best foot forward, to deliberate options and come to agreements they can live with together.

Do the proposed actions include many different “actors”?

Complex problems were created and are maintained by diverse individuals, organizations, and policies so it makes sense that it will take many different forms of action by many different individuals, organizations, and government to unstick and replace the old patterns. People usually want to make a positive difference but will be motivated to take their actions and contributions in different ways. Some of these actions might be short term and easy to take on voluntarily, and some might be longer term, requiring some policy development and committee work. Some larger questions might require more deliberation by the community.

Is there a forum for the public to deliberate about the decisions that need to be made?

Often public interactions are in the form of debate or dialogue that do not provide the container needed for deeper consideration or deliberation that lead to effective decision-making. To weigh out the costs and consequences that come with making decisions and taking actions, the public needs a structured well-prepared deliberative process with moderators and record keepers for small break out groups. With sufficient preparation through the assistance of a trained facilitator, several approaches or options can be developed and made into an issue booklet. This booklet forms the basis for general public deliberation, which takes approximately 3 hours.

Is there a method for follow up on the actions decided upon in the deliberation?

As the deliberation has likely generated several different actions to be taken by several different, ‘actors’, steering committees can be formed to assist the coordination and networking of these actions.

Is there a method for ongoing evaluation and adaptation?

It is important to develop methods of tracking the actions, observing what results occurred, reflecting on what was learned and what adjustments need to be made. This creates a dynamic action-learning loop.

Is there a way to institutionalize this form of response to complex public issues so it eventually becomes the community's or organization's normal way of doing business?

The skills and processes which are learned through designing and holding deliberative decision-making forums can be used over and over for other issues so that in time they become part of the civic culture and can sustain effective and comprehensive responses to social change.

*For further information on facilitation, training or consultation regarding community engagement and deliberative decision-making go to Programs and Services at **HYPERLINK** "<http://www.integrativelearninginstitute.com>"*
www.integrativelearninginstitute.com

This checklist has been developed by Jan Inglis of the Integrative Learning Institute and combines the fields of adult development, behavioral sciences, complexity theory, action inquiry and deliberative democracy. It incorporates theory and research of Sara Ross, Bill Torbert, Michael Commons, Paul Yankelovich and others.

Integrative Learning Institute
Evolving Capacities to Respond to Complexity

Jan Inglis *HYPERLINK "http://www.integrativelearninginstitute.com"*
www.integrativelearninginstitute.com *3Ddemocracy@telus.net*