

Citizen sourcing in the public interest

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Introduction

At the end of 2006, Time Magazine declared 'You' person of the year – a nod to the videosharing site YouTube that for many embodies the engine of Internet growth today: participation.

Participation is the watchword of our time. Almost every sector of the economy is undergoing substantial change as Internet technologies – specifically 'web2.0' – become increasingly central to organizations' growth strategies. More and more people are being asked for their input and involvement in the creation and distribution of organizational value. At the same time, new ideas about how people learn and thrive within systems are transforming the way people experience institutional and civic life: opportunities for dialogue, deliberation, and creativity are increasingly common features in emerging modes of participation. 'Search' processes, 'open space' techniques and polling technologies – to name just a few – are emerging as standard practices within visioning, strategic planning and design exercises in a range of contexts.

This transformation in the 'culture of participation' is having a profound influence on discourses surrounding the role of citizens in governance as well – from local level councils to regional and global policy-making bodies. Participation has become a hallmark of good governance in democracies and democratic institutions around the world. Innovation in the practice of citizen participation is rapidly increasing – from a proliferation of vibrant face-to-face approaches to the explosion of experiments in online democracy. These experiences are not limited to local, state, or national governments; participatory reforms are being undertaken through international bodies like the United Nations (UN) and the European Community (EU) and led by multilateral institutions like the World Bank.

The Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD, 2001) recently reported:

Engaging citizens in policy making is a sound investment and a core element of good governance. It allows governments to tap wider sources of information, perspectives, and potential solutions, and improves the quality of the decisions reached. Equally important, it contributes to building public trust in government, raising the quality of democracy and strengthening civic capacity (OECD 2001: 11).

However, effective participation is no easy task – questions of representation, autonomy, transparency and accountability lie at the core of good practice. The management of knowledge – information used to inform decisions – is central to effective governance. When hundreds, sometimes thousands of citizens, are engaged in information and knowledge building exercises in service of decision-making, the careful application of information and communication technologies is a critical factor of success.

Global Voices (www.globalvoices.org), a United States-based organization, has been working with governments around the world to bring citizens and decision-makers into closer partnership around land-use, budgeting, and agenda-setting decisions for over a decade. Through its work at all levels of government, the organization has developed a set of principles and practices aimed to support citizen involvement in many contexts, including emerging democracies. This work typically leverages state-of-the art technology to enable large scale public deliberation – involving from 500 to 5,000 citizens at a time –although the principles of good citizen engagement can be employed regardless of the technological tools available to practitioners.

This article aims to showcase two key approaches to citizen participation in democratic governance. The first involves a shift from citizens as consumers to active shapers of government policies and programs (Cornwall and Gaventa 2001). The second involves a shift from information exchange models to information processing models of citizen engagement (Jones and Baumgartner 1995). These approaches entail three basic adjustments to the policy design process: first, they view citizen engagement as necessarily influential within decision-making processes; second, they acknowledge that knowledge building processes can have profoundly positive benefits to the substance, transparency, legitimacy, and fairness of policy development under most circumstances; and third, they augment the general view of government shared by citizens.

The paper draws on Global Voices' experience, identifying how this approach contributes to designing an effective forum for participation and knowledge-building. It closes by distilling lessons from practical examples in citizen engagement, and clarifying the challenges involved in the implementation of principles of effective citizen participation in governance.

Fostering citizen participation in practice

Citizen participation is part of a family of democratic reform ideas. These include public participation, public involvement, participatory democracy, deliberative democracy and collaborative governance. While these various labels all make distinctions around the purpose, breadth, and techniques of participation, at base they recognize and build upon a fundamental right of all citizens to have a say in the decisions that affect their lives. The most inclusive citizen participation policies and programs reflect a basic understanding and adoption of this principle and extend a 'standing invitation' to citizens to engage in policy development and decision-making activities.

Citizen participation activities revolve around six aims:

- Informing and educating the general public about important policy issues;
- Improving government decisions by improving the information flow from citizens to decision makers;
- Creating opportunities for citizens to shape and in some cases, determine public policy;
- Legitimizing government decisions by ensuring that the voices of those impacted by government policy have been heard, considered, and addressed;
- Involving citizens in monitoring the outcomes of policy for evaluation; and
- Improving the quality of public life by restoring the trust and engagement of citizens.

These aims are most effectively achieved when built upon sound principles of democratic governance. As such, Global Voices has designed a model of public fora, known as a ‘21st Century Town Meeting’ (addressed below in more detail). These fora draw together demographically representative groups of citizens for day-long public deliberations around planning, budget, and policy issues. The results are made available to participants, decision-makers, and the media as a blueprint for local, regional, and sometimes national action.

While citizen participation can and does take many forms – including public hearings, citizen advisory councils, public comment periods, and community boards – the emphasis lies on information *processing* rather than information exchange activities, and on *empowerment* rather than communication outcomes (see Table 1).

Table 1: Information Exchange and Information Processing Modes of Public Participation	
<i>Information Exchange</i>	<i>Information Processing</i>
Speaker-focused	Participant-focused
Experts deliver information	Experts respond to participant questions
Citizens air individual ideas and concerns.	Citizens identify shared ideas and concerns and assign them relative priority
Participants share anecdotal evidence.	Participants use detailed, balanced background materials
Often engages the ‘usual suspects’: stakeholders and citizens already active on specific issues.	Reaches into diverse populations, including citizens not usually active, with efforts to reach under-represented.
No group discussion of questions.	Facilitator-led small group discussion.
Reports individual testimonies	Reports collective voice of everyone in the room.

Public Deliberation: principles and features

Citizen participation refers to specific fora whereby active contact is forged between decision makers and representatives of the public that are impacted by such decisions. Fundamental to this process is dialogue at key entry points along the policy development continuum of agenda setting, policy design, and implementation. In general, such fora can be considered ‘deliberative spaces’ characterized by face-to-face discussion. In some cases, the public will even be involved in such activities as ‘social monitoring’, whereby citizens are engaged in evaluation efforts to measure the impact of policy.

Authentic public deliberation deepens a basic tenet of democracy: that placing citizens closer to government affairs strengthens representation, transparency, and accountability, ultimately improving results. The distinct emphasis on information processing, understood as meaning-making, as much as information exchange (upstream and downstream communication) is what distinguishes deliberative forms of public participation from traditional techniques of public engagement. Further, deliberative democracy advances richer forms of public participation, by its efforts to engage citizens in structured dialogue around focused policy issues, and yielding benefits to participants and sponsors that extend well beyond access to information pertaining to decision making: it augments participants’ levels of knowledge on policy-related issues, cultivates trust, builds civic capacity, and, over the long term, may increase general levels of civic engagement and political participation.

Deliberation can be distinguished from other forms of public involvement through its emphasis on individuals being willing to examine solutions in terms of a common best interest, for instance, the interest of one’s neighborhood, community, or program as a whole.

Deliberation also presupposes that no individual holds the best answer to a public problem; rather, the process of structured conversation will yield optimal solutions for impacted parties and the public at large. Public deliberations also differ from, for example, negotiations: dialogues are not driven by a desire to reach compromise on diverging needs, but are driven by willingness to engage in the free and equal sharing of information that will assist everyone to arrive at reasonable if not ultimately more just and practicable outcomes.

Six guiding principles distinguish public deliberation as an approach to citizen participation from more commonly used techniques (OECD 2001).

- **Clarify values.** Value-clarification exercises make clear the basis from which decisions among policy alternatives are made. This can provide useful guidance to policy makers when trade-offs are concerned – for example, when the potential long-term effects of a decision are measured against short-term gains or losses. Value-clarification exercises are seldom included in information-exchange processes that tend to stress preference aggregation and maximization based on a quantitative analysis;
- **Focus on action.** In the best of circumstances, this principle is implemented in the form of a commitment by decision makers to incorporate the results of deliberation into policy. In some situations – for example very local, empowered settings around issues citizens have more direct involvement in, like education – deliberation results in actions that citizens and their organizations can take themselves;
- **Avoid predetermined outcomes.** Sponsors and participants in an authentic deliberation do not come with a pre-existing commitment to a particular outcome or course of action. A deliberative dialogue is not a *pro forma* exercise to convince the public of a course of action, nor is it a forum for one participant or group to persuade others to agree to a pre-defined proposal;
- **Maximize information sharing.** Recognizing that the likelihood and quality of mutually satisfactory outcomes will increase with the free exchange of knowledge and experiences, information in a deliberative forum should be complete, balanced, and free-flowing;
- **Facilitate small group discussion.** Enabling people to engage with each other in groups of 9-15 participants optimizes the opportunity for each participant to meaningfully contribute to the conversation and to feel heard. As groups increase in size, intimacy, trust, and individual voice are lost as each participant has less opportunity to speak; and
- **Engage relevant authorities.** To ensure an impact on policy-making and program development, decision makers and other authorities relevant to the issue under discussion should be a part of the process. Decision makers, like citizens, are disinclined to support policy proposals over which they have little influence or responsibility.

Deliberation is an important improvement to traditional information exchange models of public involvement – surveys, public hearings, public comment periods, and so on – through which individuals or organizations state their viewpoints, and the role of government is to collect these views and serve as an arbiter of public opinion. Through deliberative information processing models of citizen engagement, participants come to a shared understanding of underlying issues and trade-offs and, as a result, are collectively prepared to make substantively better policy recommendations (Jones 1994: 21). Such processes can reduce friction and competition between interests, and citizens experience greater satisfaction with the process when agencies ensure that public input is accounted for and reflected in the final decisions.

Most contemporary models for public deliberation – including the above mentioned ‘21st Century Town Meeting’ – share at least five features:

1. Use of ‘balanced’ or ‘neutral’ background materials;
2. Structured around small group dialogue;
3. Emphasize learning through an exploration of the widest possible range of perspectives;
4. New knowledge is expected to inform individual and group recommendations on the issue or problem at hand; and
5. Findings from discussion are made available to community members and leaders in a final report.

In the very best cases, public deliberation is organized around fora that directly influence policies and programmes. Democratic deliberation has been experimented with in a range of settings within and outside of government, both online and face-to-face. Around the world examples are available where citizen deliberation has taken root within government as an ‘institutionalized practice’ (for example, participatory budgeting practices in Brazil), and a growing number of experiences at all levels of government indicate that wide-spread public deliberation is increasingly seen as a legitimate and effective technique for governments to partner with citizens in policy development and decision-making processes.

Putting Public Deliberation into Practice

In addition to the above-mentioned guiding principles, seven factors have proven to be key in the success of the process (Global Voices 2004). These factors involve the ability to:

1. **Educate participants.** Citizens need access to relevant information about the issues and choices involved, in order to articulate informed opinions;
2. **Frame issues neutrally.** Policy issues should be offered in an unbiased framing, so that the public can grapple with the difficult choices facing decision makers, and thereby understand their complexity;
3. **Foster diversity.** In order to adequately reflect the impacted community, a demographically balanced group of citizens should be involved in the deliberations;
4. **Ensure buy-in from policy makers.** Without commitment from decision makers to engage in the process, it will be difficult to ensure the results are used in policy making;
5. **Support quality deliberation.** Facilitated, high-quality discussion can help ensure all voices are heard;
6. **Demonstrate public consensus.** Produce information that clearly highlights the public’s shared priorities; and
7. **Sustain involvement.** By involving the public in feedback, monitoring, and evaluation of decision-making and policy processes, ongoing involvement can be achieved.

Each of these factors implies important choices in terms of technology at each stage of the exercise – from outreach and recruitment to design to documentation. Table 2 summarizes the considerations in terms of process-supporting technologies.

Table 2: Principles to Practice – Technology Planning Questions	
<i>Design principle</i>	<i>Key considerations</i>
Educate participants	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Who is the target audience? What forms of communication will be most effective? • What mainstream media partnerships can be created/ leveraged? • What new media channels exist?
Neutral framing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Whose points of view are most influential on the

	<p>issues?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How are these issues currently framed in public discussion? • How do these issues relate to the ‘real lives’ of the target audience?
Diversity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What are the key demographic groups in the population to be represented? • How can those groups most easily register to participate? • What efforts must be made to reach ‘hard to reach’ groups?
Policy-maker buy-in	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What tools do policy-makers presently use to involve citizens (and vice versa)? • What level of public accountability are they committing to the process? • What is their commitment to sustaining engagement?
Quality deliberation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How can diverse populations be involved? • How can ‘inactive’ citizens be mobilized? • How can the under-represented be reached?
Public consensus	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How can small group discussion best be facilitated?
Sustain involvement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How can the collective voice of everyone in the room most effectively be recorded and disseminated?

Public deliberation model: the ‘21st Century Town Meeting’

At present, there are three kinds of reforms driving the movement to ‘open up’ and decentralize democratic governments around the world. These new opportunities for expanding citizen participation are created when:

1. Governments make *more information publicly available* through new channels, empowering individual citizens and groups to make more informed choices and in general advance the goal of a transparent state;
2. Governments create *new spaces and institutional arrangements for participation*, both online and face-to-face. Such initiatives create opportunities for participation in policy development, and will often involve institutional reforms that ensure the results of public participation are fed into decision-making processes;
3. Decision makers are held to *higher levels of accountability* through the use of democratic audits, scorecards, and other third-party participatory performance measurement tools (also known as ‘social monitoring’). These techniques range from simple service delivery ‘scorecards’ to wireless and handheld participatory monitoring systems.

While the global drive toward openness and transparency is supported by various means and technologies – for instance the transformation of journalism by the emergence of weblogs – those presented here reflect an interest in more direct forms of citizen participation in government activities. In countries like India, Brazil, and Singapore – and even at the transnational level in the case of the ASEAN People’s Assembly – new policy frameworks and guidelines are emerging that place information, consultation, and participation at the center of emerging administrative practice.

Global Voices has primarily focused its efforts on opportunities to open new spaces for authentic public participation through deliberation. This has been done by applying the

principles outlined above in the framework of the ‘21st Century Town Meeting’, all the while adapting technologies and process choices to reflect contextual differences. Taking into account that the ‘Town Meeting’ process was developed in the North, it cannot be taken for granted that the same technologies and processes will transfer effectively to other contexts, such as emerging democracies in developing countries. As such, in order to design effective public deliberation exercises that put the principles of good practice into play, a stewardship plan should be adapted to local needs and requirements, guiding choices around process and technology adoption.

Bearing this in mind, the ‘Town Meeting’ has several distinct elements – from a carefully planned recruitment strategy to the final report – that make it a complex forum for public decision-making. The process focuses on discussion and deliberation among citizens rather than speeches, question and answer sessions or panel presentations. In preparation of a Town Meeting, participants receive detailed, balanced background discussion guides to increase their knowledge of the issues under consideration. During the Town Meeting diverse groups of citizens participate in round-table discussions (ten to twelve people per table), deliberating in depth about key policy, resource allocation or planning issues. Each table discussion is supported by a trained facilitator who ensures that participants stay on task and work democratically to identify shared concerns and priorities.

Technology stewardship in the planning and design of a Town Meeting transforms the individual table discussions into synthesized recommendations representative of the entire assembly: ideas are submitted per table, using networked computers. This input is then grouped into areas of common concern by a ‘theme team’, and emerging themes are reflected back to the assembly using video projection. Each participant is able to vote anonymously on specific proposals according to their informed, individual preferences using wireless polling keypads. Subsequently, a report of the proceedings of the Town Meeting is made available to participants, decision-makers and the media at the end of the day.

The Town Meeting model provides the several distinct benefits to citizens and decision-makers over many commonly accepted practices such as public hearings and open meetings. These benefits include:

- The meeting provides an effective way for *general interest citizens* to have a voice in the public decisions that impact their lives;
- The scale of these meetings attracts substantial *media attention* and *political leadership*, often increasing momentum and interest in a proposal, process or issue;
- The format gives citizens an opportunity to *learn more* about important public issues, hear a diversity of perspectives and understand critical trade-offs;
- The *use of technology* provides an effective, efficient way to measure the degree of public support for proposals; and
- The report, distributed at the end of the day, immediately *identifies priorities*, areas of agreement and specific recommendations.

The process of planning and implementing a Town Meeting can significantly increase local and institutional capacity to organize and implement effective citizen engagement exercises. During a Town Meeting the entire group responds to the strongest themes generated from table discussions and votes on recommendations to decision makers. Decision makers actively engage in the meeting by participating in table discussions, observing the process and responding to citizen input at the end of the meeting. Before the meeting ends, results

from the discussions are compiled into a report, which is distributed to participants, decision makers, and the media as they leave. An additional benefit of the model is that it often contributes to the formation of new networks that seek out their own ways to stay connected, monitor the process, and take local action.

Addressing challenges: citizen participation

There are limits to which most participatory processes – including a Town Meeting – can be adapted to achieve fully effective public involvement when they come from outside of government. Only through authentic engagement by conveners and decision-makers will knowledge shared and commitments developed be applied to policy design, implementation, and evaluation. This is one of the major challenges to successful implementation of the model: convincing the main stakeholders of the benefits of participatory decision-making. For instance, significant skepticism remains among political elites toward the very idea of empowered citizen participation in policy development, as became apparent during a government advisory trajectory in Indonesia on electoral reform. Similar skepticism can be observed among practitioners themselves: for instance, heavily mobilized groups such as laborers in the Philippines proved to be wary of participation in deliberative forums for fear of their voice being ‘co-opted’ in the process. One way by which these effects can be addressed is by applying technology to improve access to information for decision-makers and participants; through more efficient information collection and dissemination, more informed decisions can be made. However, technology cannot stand on its own as guarantor of effective participation: it is the shared commitment of citizens, stakeholders, and decision-makers to a process and its outcomes complemented by effective technology stewardship that will determine the degree of ‘empowerment’ brought about by the exercise. For effective public engagement, each party must set aside their prejudices about the other parties’ willingness to listen and participate – and simultaneously be authentically willing to do so themselves.

While every degree of citizen participation – from information exchange to consultation to full collaboration – has a place in the policy development process, it is empowered participation through engagement of citizens that offers the greatest opportunities for improving policy outcomes in contemporary democratic governance. A key consideration when designing a citizen engagement strategy is identifying where the key issue lies in the policy process: is it an issue competing for space on the public agenda? Is it an existing policy that needs to be updated? Is it a new policy that needs to be designed? Or has the issue already been addressed, but are new impetuses needed to achieve better results? Identifying which of these issues is central to the process will determine which degree of citizen participation is required, how they can contribute to the implementation of the trajectory and what they need to focus on in terms of monitoring and evaluating the outcomes.

The degree of authority for citizens in a process is determined by many conditions on the ground, including policy and issue context, incentive structures, a convener’s level of confidence and experience, resource constraints, political will, and government policy.

Lessons from Practice

This model has been applied towards effective citizen engagement within diverse a range of contexts in both the North and the South – notably in Asia and Africa. Four lessons can be

drawn from this experience which can be useful in guiding citizen participation activities in most settings.

Lesson 1: effective outreach and recruitment are conditions for success

The accuracy and legitimacy of the knowledge produced during a public engagement exercise depends on the people sharing it. As such, a critical success factor of any participation exercise is gathering the 'right' people, with direct links to decision-makers. While every community has its conventional political wisdom about who will and will not, should or should not participate, practice shows that often groups that are traditionally difficult to reach are, if approached, in fact quite willing to engage in complex policy discussions.

Over the years and in dozens of communities – most recently the hurricane-devastated city of New Orleans (USA) – Global Voices has developed a method to ensure that all voices are represented in planning processes. This includes three levels of outreach: mass media, networks, and 'on the ground' or pavement recruitment.

1. Mass media: leverage mainstream media outlets such as radio, print, and where possible television to ensure broad public markets are penetrated;
2. Networks: identify and work through the pre-existing networks of community-based groups to ensure that organized constituencies are targeted;
3. Pavement: hit the ground and make personal contact through outreach materials in key geographic areas where populations that are more difficult to include can be found.

Sending staff and volunteers out onto the streets to make personal contact as a recruitment tactic is particularly important in rural settings, as recent efforts in Sierra Leone showed. As part of a World Bank mid-term reporting process, stakeholders had been informed about opportunities to participate in informative sessions. The initial mobilization strategy relied heavily on mainstream media outreach and therefore largely failed to bring in participants from some of the more remote, rural regions. The local stakeholders however generally reaped their information through trusted local sources, and as such, it became evident that such personal contacts would be necessary to mobilize participation.

To enhance such efforts, flexibility is key. For instance, by providing daily registration reports to outreach teams on the ground, efforts can be quickly adjusted at any of the three levels of recruitment – particularly at the pavement level – to ensure that all demographic and geographic targets are included.

Lesson 2: think strategically about stakeholder involvement

Each issue in a public engagement exercise depends on a specific constellation of stakeholders vital to the success of the substance, process, and outcomes. Understanding the range of constituencies, interests and points-of-view that need to be included in a citizen participation process is a delicate process, from outreach and recruitment stages to agenda design and implementation. Ensuring that the right stakeholders are not only invited to the table but also participate in the process is essential for both the legitimacy and credibility of the meeting as well as the ownership, communication and implementation of the outcomes.

Experience in Sierra Leone showed that since post-conflict efforts to decentralize government began to taking place, there was real confusion about the jurisdiction of customary tribal leaders and the political cartography. Not only were chiefs the traditional arbitrators and

decision-makers, they were also often the sole local revenue-raising authority. With the arrival of new democratic institutions, for example local councils, new ways of shared decision-making and revenue-raising became essential. By the same token, any efforts to engage citizens in any decision-making process needed to ensure that local chiefs and councilors participated in and particularly supported the process as a means to achieve individual and collective benefit.

Lesson 3: invest in inclusion

Often, participatory processes in a development context will be synonymous with a multicultural context. In other words, participatory processes will invite diverse groups of people to deliberate important public matters; but often not all of these groups have equal access to information, which raises that bar to affording equal opportunity for participation in the process. In this context, language has proved to be an acute barrier, with information resources being inaccessible to those who can not read or do not command the mainstream language. To overcome such challenges of mixed-language settings, conveners can consider:

- Printing background materials, discussion guides, and follow-up reports in multiple languages;
- Ensuring real-time translators are present at both the table and the plenary levels. Table-level translators support dialogue, while plenary translators enable participants to follow presentations using headsets;
- Facilitating parallel track discussions, enabling different groups to work their way through the agenda as a distinct group, reporting the results during plenary sessions.

To further augment the inclusiveness of the forums:

- Develop plain-language materials that reduce the amount to jargon and technical language to a minimum;
- Provide visual presentation of quantitative and qualitative data so that participants can grasp important information using graphs, charts, and illustrations.
- Match the facilitator base to participant base. Skilled facilitation and careful discussion moderation can contribute to minimizing the adverse effects of caste and other cultural differences.

Lesson 4: communicate outcomes widely

One of the greatest challenges in making use of deliberative forums lies in translating the shared understanding and resulting views of deliberators into a publicly accessible form. Deliberation is a formalized process yielding insight into what the general public thinks; however, once a group of citizens has been brought together to participate in deliberation, their views no longer represent a 'snapshot' of mainstream public views, but represent a more informed group within the population whose views may differ dramatically from the snap judgments of the public captured by traditional survey methods.

Therefore, it is critical to reconcile the gap between the deliberators and the general public, and two critical efforts can be made to achieve this. First, the convener should ensure that the deliberative forum carries with it legitimacy in the public eye, that the forum is visible, inclusive, and transparent (see also lesson 2). Second, results of the deliberation must be broadly distributed to the general public and accompanied by opportunities for feedback.

Conclusions

The key lesson in citizen participation around the world is that people in communities are eager for their voices to be heard in the decision-making processes that affect their quality of life and their experience of place. The involvement of demographically representative groups of people in these participatory processes is the cornerstone of legitimate, credible and solid policy advice. Such participatory processes must understand and involve citizens not simply as users and choosers, but as makers and shapers of policies.

Information processing models of citizen engagement are more effective than information exchange models: while the latter are valuable for limited two-way communication, the former create opportunities for individuals to understand and actively develop a shared understanding of a topic or issue. In turn, this allows decision-makers to position themselves for making better informed, less conflict-prone and more sustainable decisions in the public interest. Technology can play an important role in supporting these processes, but sound stewardship is necessary to ensure it is used appropriately in each context.

The success of such fora depends on the participation of all stakeholders. Therefore, decision-makers must be present in the room, but more than that, distinct effort must be made to ensure that difficult to reach groups are included. This can be effectuated for instance by involving trusted sources in the information processing stage, and ensuring transportation and childcare are attended to. Overall, the process should be stewarded in such a way that from outreach and recruitment strategies to informed dialogue, the right people are in the room and have the chance to meaningfully participate. This might involve breaking from conventional wisdom and practice, but by doing so, they are strengthening the very fabric of their democracy.

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Abstract

The ‘21st Century Town Meeting’ is a process using collaborative technologies to engage large groups of citizens – literally thousands at a time – to work together to solve urgent public problems. This model involves the creation of a public space that allows

demographically representative groups of citizens to work from a shared understanding of the issues on the table and draw upon their experience and knowledge in dialogue to develop shared policy priorities. By combining small group table conversations with collaborative technologies, the process enables intimate discussion and large-scale decision-making in a vibrant, dynamic public forum.

This case study explores the challenges, critical success factors and lessons in applying this model towards more effective citizen inclusion in policy processes.

About the author



Lars Hasselblad Torres is an educator, writer and artist with passions revolving around art + technology + participation, all in the context of education for development, Lars is currently focusing his energy on the Global Peace Tiles Project (www.peacetiles.net), which aims to build bonds between communities through art, as well as mixedmedia.us (<http://mixedmedia.us>), a site for discussion of the ways mixed media art can be used to promote development. In the past he has been a founding faculty member at the Booker T. Washington Public Charter School for Technical Arts (<http://www.btwschool.org>), where he developed an arts-based curriculum for urban studies. He also co-founded and ran the Center for Collaborative Art and Visual Education (CAVE) in Washington, DC - an artist-run exhibition and education space in Dupont Circle. Email Lars Hasselblad Torres at peacetiles@gmail.com

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