

Effectively engaging “stakeholders” in setting directions is crucial in problem-solving—but fraught with pitfalls. Here’s how to design and manage planning efforts more effectively in a world of changing rules.

*Sections to guide you:*

- *Ideas in brief*
- *Ideas at work*
- *Taking stock: applying the ideas in your community*

STRATEGY TOOL #2

# Planning Together: How (and How Not) to Engage Stakeholders in Charting a Course

By Xavier de Souza Briggs

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## Ideas in Brief

Part of solving problems effectively with others is *planning* effectively through joint effort—understanding problems, generating options for response, evaluating those options meaningfully, and choosing a roadmap for action. But over the past few decades, a wide array of trends have expanded the scope, participation requirements, and potential—and the potential abuses—of planning.

Designed and managed well, participatory planning can produce better substantive ideas, useful relationships and stronger civic institutions, new agreements across stubborn divides, and the kind of legitimacy and political support that’s increas-

ingly important for acting on social problems. On the other hand, opening up the direction-setting process, particularly if participation is more “ritual” than reality, can lead to frustrated expectations, power grabs in which parochial interests dominate, technically deficient ideas, and deeper conflicts and mistrust. Understanding the pitfalls and abuses is especially important as attention to diversity—in culture, gender, religion, and other dimensions—grows across societies. Unfortunately, most how-to advice dwells on participation tactics and techniques. This tool helps you answer the four big questions that define effective participation *strategies*—and thus make better choices about techniques, too.

## Ideas at Work

STRATEGIC QUESTION	DECISION ISSUES	CAVEATS
<p><b>1. Why should we engage stakeholders in planning?</b> Participatory work can serve a variety of overall purposes, such as creating a wider democratic mandate to act, better substantive ideas to drive action, and feelings of psychological “ownership” and investment in collective work.</p>	<p>Are we looking to define a broad issue agenda on which some group or community can plan and act? To set strategies for action on a pre-defined set of issues? To design a specific project or program, given strategies in place?</p>	<p>Institutions (or alliances of same) often send confusing signals about why planning is happening, why now, and what exactly the benefits, costs, and limits of participation are likely to be.</p>
<p><b>2. Who should be involved and in what roles?</b> Effective participation requires setting boundaries that define participants’ roles and responsibilities to each other, not as a matter of imposing control but so trust and coordination can develop in place of chaos or “process paralysis.”</p>	<p>Who are the primary stakeholders of the decision, project, or policy at issue? Who else might be consulted, or educated, in a broader “public”? Who should organize and sponsor planning events? Facilitate them? Who can observe, and who should make decisions?</p>	<p>Failure to sort out roles can lead to a “circus-tent” approach, in which “more” (players, ideas, events) is assumed to mean “better.” Systematic process designs can help—or create the illusion of order, imposing roles and linear steps that may need to evolve over time.</p>
<p><b>3. What is the proper scope of our planning process?</b> Few projects or institutions contemplate constant participation in every aspect of decision-making. So setting boundaries around the <i>targets</i> of participation—the issues and decisions up for discussion, the authority to decide—is key.</p>	<p>Does our work require broad boundaries, so new issues and interests can constantly be put forward? Are we to generate advice for decision-makers, or are we empowered to decide ourselves? How do we relate to those who make everyday (routine) decisions?</p>	<p>Confusion over the scope of participation can quickly undermine the legitimacy and effectiveness of a planning process. Sharp conflicts often emerge when the players have different, and perhaps unstated, assumptions about the appropriate scope of participation.</p>
<p><b>4. How should we put our participation strategy to work?</b> Smart tactics, well implemented, put a strategy to work. But tactics should encompass a variety of phases and dimensions of planning, evolving as the project or process evolves.</p>	<p>How should we identify, organize, and convene stakeholders? Build a common knowledge base around the issues we will address? Present information and get feedback? Improve deliberation and shared decision-making itself?</p>	<p>Much how-to advice deals piecemeal with creating effective meetings or using info technologies to support decision-making. Beware getting lost in an overload of information, with too few useful ideas and legitimate decisions.</p>

# Planning Together: How (and How Not) to Engage Stakeholders in Charting a Course

by Xavier de Souza Briggs

Effective action in the public interest calls for a wide array of efforts to engage stakeholders in charting a course together, for example:

- A local government needs to engage businesses, non-governmental groups, and citizens at large in defining a shared vision of the future for their town, city, or region—or in setting priorities for the annual public budget.
- A political organizing group moves from building relationships and defining core concerns among its constituents to developing a concrete policy agenda or desired “program of change” on which the group can focus its resources and influence.
- An alliance of nonprofit organizations need to define their joint advocacy and service delivery work in the context of a meaningful strategy for action that reflects changing community assets and needs, funding realities, and the distinct cultures and habits of the organizations involved.
- A “community-based” development organization needs to engage residents, merchants, service providers, and others in the organization’s target neighborhood in developing a broad plan for improving the area as a place

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to live and work—or in designing a specific economic development project with high potential.

- An environmental protection agency needs to engage local stakeholders in defining standards and monitoring practices for resource management that accommodate diverse economic and social interests in the community.
- A group of 10-15 people in a community meet regularly in a “study circle,” or participate in on-

**In the making of ham and eggs, both the chicken and the pig ‘participate.’ But it can hardly be said that both benefit from their participation. (Latin American proverb)**

line dialogues, to discuss an issue of shared concern and then create more informed action strategies.

- A national or provincial government needs to develop a participatory strategy for reducing poverty within its borders, working with non-governmental and private players to address economic growth and inequality.
- An international aid agency encourages “community-driven development” led by grassroots groups, some of them informal, to make their own decisions about how to invest new resources and monitor their effects.

These needs, and the practical and political changes they create, are more insistent and more varied than ever before. Though not universal by any means, the demand for wider stakeholder engagement in charting a course is simply part of the culture of contemporary problem-solving in the public interest. It’s in the air we breathe, in almost every corner of the globe, par-

ticularly as our expectations of democracy grow and change.

In this sense, “participation” has arrived in the world. Now what?

Where it works, more *participatory* planning and decision-making can produce better substantive ideas, useful problem-solving relationships and the trust needed to take action together in the future (“social capital”), stronger community institutions, new possibilities for forging agreement across old divides, and other tangible and intangible bene-



fits. Students of democracy see these as crucial gains, since so many citizens are disengaged, distrusting, and dispirited. As political scientist Robert Putnam outlines in *Democracies in Flux*, democracy, however its meanings vary from place to place, has become a very non-participatory business in many countries.

More generally, planning helps stakeholders make the most of limited resources, identify and address key uncertainties that lie ahead, and identify information needs that can lead to useful learning—all crucial in a world of changing problems and needs.

But where it doesn’t work, or where it

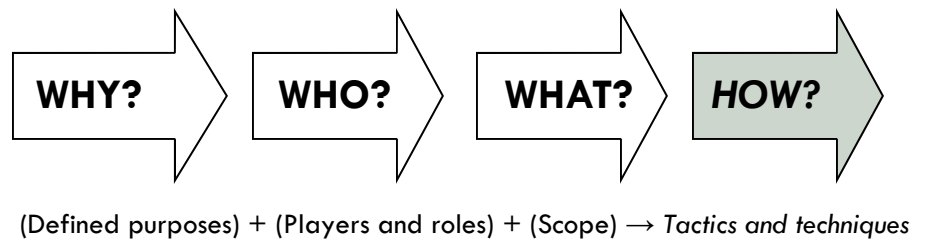
is mishandled, “opening up” the direction setting and decision-making process can generate confused and disappointed expectations, power grabs in which special interests dominate, technically deficient ideas (or excessive confidence in the ideas in spite of important uncertainties), deeper social and political conflicts, and further loss of trust in several directions—among citizens, between citizens and their government, and across the government, non-governmental, and business sectors. Sometimes, these pitfalls or abuses reflect a process in which participation is more “ritual” than real—i.e., in which a show of obtaining input proceeds but there is little or no room to actually influence decision-making or behavior. Or where planning becomes, as government innovation expert Gail Christopher puts it, “an exercise in togetherness” rather than a substantively valuable exercise that leads to a better collective future.

Sadly, some so-called failures in this arena are anything but accidental. That is, some participatory planning is, by design, limited to cursory input, few genuinely new ideas, limited discussions of the real stakes of decisions, and poor supports to help stakeholders become informed and capable of exerting a real influence. At the extremes, a process of engagement becomes a mechanism of mere marketing or even of manipulation.

Unfortunately, most how-to advice on how to handle a world of increased stakeholder expectations for participation dwells on *tactics*—how to run a public meeting or use the internet to communicate planning aims, how to create generate alternative visions of the future (scenarios) to improve decision-making today, how to work with a facilitator in a formal consensus building process, how to recreate democracy at a human scale in big communities using electronic polling and other new technologies, and more.

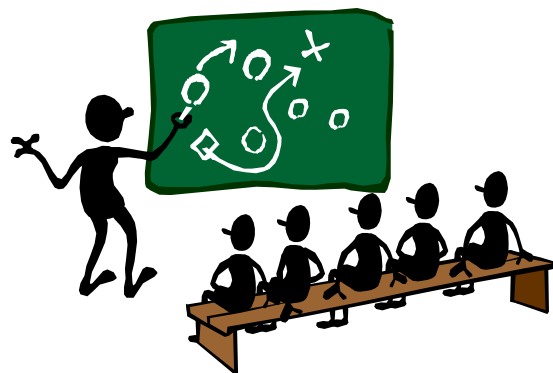
Good tactics are important, of course, but consider this analogy: Very often, when our work is confusing and expectations are high, we need to begin not by

Figure 1. The Participation Strategy Map: Define purposes, players and scope, then align tactics



learning how to “dig” faster where we are already digging—I say this figuratively to mean “apply a familiar approach to a familiar target”—but by determining whether or not we are digging in the right place at all (working on the appropriate target) and whether digging is the activity we should focus on at all.

This strategy tool thus has a



broader purpose than handbooks of participation tactics and techniques. We’ll consider how to design and manage better participatory processes so as to avoid failures, which often emerge because the purposes of wider stakeholder participation are a bit confused or confusing, the roles of the players involved ambiguous and contested, the scope of participation awkward or inappropriate, and the tactics and steps of implementation weak or inconsistent (given the context or situation to which they are applied).

Figure 1 presents the model around which this tool is organized. The logic

is simply this: effective participation calls for much more than a grab-bag of tactics. It calls for a strategy that begins by defining the “why” of participation—overall purposes, given a specific context—and from there the who, what, and how. Most generic how-to advice on the tactics of participation ignores these “upstream” or strategic questions that do so much to determine the structure and impacts of participatory planning and decision-making.

But before we explore the strategy model and the choices it is meant to sharpen, let’s consider some concrete cases that illustrate the “textbook” contexts for participation that I outlined above. We’ll come back to some of these in later sections, as a way of putting key concepts to work.

## Participatory Planning and Decision-making at Work

In inner-city Boston, a non-governmental organization called the Dudley Street Neighborhood Initiative works to engage residents, merchants, and others in its target neighborhood in land development, human service, business development, and other efforts to improve their lives and livelihoods. Vigorous campaigns for the organization’s board of directors and meetings and outreach efforts conducted in the neighborhood’s five main languages attest to the commitment to empowering people in the area to take control of their collective future. But the high rate and intensity of participation by young people, parents, and others also reflect the organization’s—and the community’s—success at deliberating issues *with real stakes* and at

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preparing “participants” to participate *in a meaningful way*.

In Salt Lake City, Utah, another non-governmental organization, EnvisionUtah, works to keep its fast-changing metropolitan region “beautiful, prosperous, and neighborly for future generations.” Concerned about rapid growth and the strains it places on the region’s environment, economy, and quality of life, citizen leaders, businesses, and policymakers, came together to develop a “Quality Growth Strategy” for the area. EnvisionUtah has used innovative technology for “scenario development,” public opinion surveys, television announcements, and more traditional grassroots campaigns to educate and engage a wide public in making more informed decisions about the region’s future.

Beyond triggering a visioning (direction setting) process, EnvisionUtah, like the Dudley Street group, has helped stakeholders to *implement* that vision more effectively as well, creating wider support for key ideas and helping policymakers, service providers, and everyday citizens make smarter choices.

In the Brazilian city of Porto Alegre, residents, merchants, and non-governmental organizations, including elected representatives of poor neighborhoods, help to develop local public investment priorities through “participatory budgeting.” Some stakeholders represent *geographic* areas, while others are assigned to work on cross-cutting *themes*, such as health or transportation, which concern every part of the city.

In the city of Belém to the north, local leaders are pushing for something more—a “Congress for the City.” Not an elected law-making arm of government in the usual sense, the Congress is to be a vehicle for directly engaging everyday citizens, businesses, and faith and other

non-governmental organizations in a wide variety of community problem-solving efforts. More than ad hoc planning, participatory budgeting in many Brazilian cities is an institutionalized element of local government. It’s hard work, but it has become a core part of how government operates to define and act on public priorities. Observers have documented and debated these efforts, and similar efforts in the U.S. and elsewhere, in such recent books as *Deepening Democracy* and *The Rebirth of Urban Democracy*.

In Mauritania in West Africa, the World Bank and International Monetary Fund have offered unprecedented relief from the huge debt obligations that burden many developing countries—in exchange for the development of an aggressive “poverty reduction strategy.” The aid agencies promoting this innovative but untested approach to policy change in the developing world have stressed that the process for

and also of savvy program design and delivery.

In Europe, supporters of more decentralized decision-making and greater involvement of citizens in social problem-solving secured passage of France’s *politique de la ville* or “urban policy,” which calls for ongoing neighborhood input into local government priorities.

Finally, a wide variety of efforts—in the U.S., Urban Network, Youth-N-Action, the Young People’s Project, plus Belém’s Congress of the City mentioned above, and more—are creating special opportunities for children and adolescents to participate in, and even design and run, community planning, municipal budget development, and other processes. Worldwide, there’s new attention being paid to gender, ethnic and religious heritage, youth, and other types of diversity in participatory practice.

What do these cases have in common? Each reflects changing thinking about *how* and *with whom* to tackle community problems as the world changes around us. More specifically, each case involves the promise and the pitfalls of participation, and all, in one way or another, bear the stamp of earlier efforts

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defining this strategy must be “inclusive” of businesses, non-governmental organizations, and others.

That invitation—with participatory “strings” attached—mirrors a wide variety of efforts, from villages to rapidly growing Third World cities to the national level and beyond, to make international development more “community-driven.” Decades of failed development programs, many of which imported outsider views of local problems, have made effective participation a key element of good governance—

to make participation an essential part of our public life.

**What’s Driving Participation: A Quick Scan**

Over the past few decades, most fields of policy and practice have seen increased demands for less “top-down” decision-making and action, for a wider engagement of stakeholders in setting directions (“planning”) and shaping other kinds of decisions that matter for their lives. This is not only true in public service or social problem-solving but in the private marketplace as well.

*... participation is increasingly thought of us a right, whether legal or moral or both, of the less influential “grassroots,” not just the elite “grasstops” of a community.*

Leading companies and management gurus tout the importance of promoting innovation and commitment through decentralized decision-making—through “empowered teams” of managers and front-line workers, for example.

Many trends, too many to detail here, are driving this demand for participation. Changes in government, and how we relate to government, are especially important. For one, government and other traditional authorities have come under increased scrutiny and skepticism, with particularly significant declines in public trust seen in the United States over the past forty years. Where once democracy was primarily about electing representatives to “steer” government along with help from trained administrators and planners, we now view public problems as requiring active citizenry and a collective or civic capacity to generate solutions.

Traditional public involvement was often limited to civic elites and policy input objectives, as John Clayton Thomas notes in *Public Participation in Public Decisions*. For example, blue-ribbon panels and civic councils typically channeled the influence of the most powerful in a community, and public involvement focused on the major policy decisions of lawmakers. But since the 1960s, key players outside of government have also become deeply involved in implementing policy, and there is increased pressure to involve the disenfranchised.

More broadly stated, participation is increasingly thought of us a right, whether legal or moral or both, of the less influential “grassroots,” not just the elite “grasstops” of a community.

Government has been decentralized in much of the world, on the notion that many decisions can best be made, and many services and investments best managed, closer to the citizen. More broadly,

efforts to re-invent government often emphasize renewed accountability to citizens, in part through participation mechanisms.

Other institutions engaged in doing the public’s work have also changed. Non-profit or non-governmental organizations have multiplied in number

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and variety very rapidly over the past few decades. While much of this owes to government’s “outsourcing” key services to private and nonprofit service provider organizations, nonprofits have long taken on some of the work of organizing citizens to have a voice on their own behalf, especially where political parties, unions, and other more traditional nonprofit organizers were perceived to be inadequate to the task—or actively resisting needed change. Democracy, like the competitive marketplace, includes some healthy “creative destruction.”

For businesses, on the other hand, there are enormous pressures to compete in a changing global economy.

Today’s economy rewards the retention of talented people (which often means expanding their participation in “strategic” decisions with significant stakes), rewards the constant building of knowledge—generating more and better ideas throughout companies and networks of companies—and rewards *innovation—putting ideas to productive use better and faster, at lower cost*. All of these involve managing new and more varied forms of participation and “knowledge management,” both inside and outside of firms, along wider networks.

In addition, in many parts of the world, though not all, formally trained

“experts” no longer hold our trust and fascination in the way that they did fifty or a hundred years ago. Thanks in part to the planning disasters of the twentieth century, and the failure of most technical thinking to allow for important changes in public values, we have less faith in expert-driven, top-down, government-dominated solutions to persistent social problems. As James Scott notes in *Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed*, experts in the great century of modernization were often well-intended but guilty of hubris (blinding them to how incomplete their knowledge and ability to predict the future really was), a lack of respect for local customs and practical knowledge, and narrow definitions of the “problem” that needed solving. These blind spots drove action on both the left and right of the political spectrum, with costly results to human life and public institutions.

There is a back-to-the-future quality to all this. As facilitation guru Michael Doyle notes in the *Facilitator’s Guide to Participatory Decision-making*, when we

**Human beings are much more likely to accept as fair, and even to actively support, decisions on which they have been consulted.**



turn to “flatter” decision-making that makes more room for practical know-how, citizen wisdom and creativity, and much more, we are returning to the deliberation and decision-making traditions on which many cultures were founded thousands of years ago. But today, we must find ways of combining the kind of deliberation and shared decision-making that has traditionally worked best in small groups with the demands for coordination, accountability, and accommodation of diversity that come with life in larger and more complex contemporary societies. So now we turn to how that can be done.

### Three Reasons to “Participate” Stakeholders

The *need* to engage a wider circle of stakeholders—literally, those with a stake in the decisions—in our work is all but taken for granted these days. As such, we run a few big risks. One is forgetting that not everyone sees wider participation—“opening up the process”—as serving their interests. A second, more basic risk is that of organizing and managing participation poorly.

In the realm of participation, and in many other areas that shape our capacity to solve problems together in a changing world, even the most noble and urgent “end” does not guarantee effective means—strategies to achieve that end. So

we want to get better at *doing* participation well, not just more persuasive at “selling” it as an ideal.

Step back for a moment from the worldwide zeal for more stakeholder participation, and a few distinct hopes become apparent. Understanding these basic hopes is important if we want to work more effectively. I’m going to label these hopes psychological, political,

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cal, and “practical”:

1. **(Psychological) “Consultation is appreciated—and rewarded.”** As Howard Raiffa notes in *The Art and Science of Negotiation*, mountains of evidence on our emotions and behavior tell us that human beings are much more likely to accept as fair, and even to actively support, decisions on which they have been consulted. We tend to “buy in” much

more often and more fully when we feel we’ve had our say. And we’ve learned that this trait, a key part of our emotional wiring, can be manipulated by those who want to ensure consent or compliance.

2. **(Political) “Democracy demands a popular mandate.”** Related to that first rationale, but going much further, is the notion that making democracy work means actively soliciting ideas and building *support* for decisions, often among many “publics.” We might think of this democratic *requirement* as including not only our government (at various levels) but also a wide variety of non-governmental organizations and other groups that claim to act in the public interest.
3. **(Practical) “Two heads are better than one.”** Often overlooked in the political or philosophical debates over participation is a very practical need to develop better ideas for addressing hard problems—something human beings have long done successfully in groups. That is, where reasons one and two reflect a need for acceptance, the third reason reflects the need for

better substantive ideas.

On the last point, as creativity guru Jim Adams outlines in *Conceptual Blockbusting*, the last few decades have spawned a wealth of techniques for managing or facilitating group problem-solving so as to enrich the ideas generated. A more cautionary way of saying this is that thousands of hours of unproductive, or even counter-productive, meetings have led us to recognize that

*If the old world offered far too much “top-down,” non-inclusive decision-making and action, the new one (still emerging) may offer too many unfocused versions of the alternative.*

two heads can be—but are not always—better than one! There is huge “upside” potential, but realizing that potential takes expertise, effort, and more than a little patience.

This is more and more true as decision-making is opened up to more socially diverse stakeholders—people who differ on cultural and religious identity, socio-economic background, political ideology, life stage, gender, and so on. Divergent habits of thinking and doing can be sources of breakthrough problem-solving, if managed well, or sources of stand-off, stereotyping, and worse.

Participants May Differ on the Overall “Why.” A few things about this list should strike us immediately. One is that participators, along with those who design or manage participatory processes, may come to the table (or public arena) with very different ideas about why participation matters and what it is likely to produce in terms of important benefits.

For some, the first rationale—building a sense of ownership—may be most critical. Change agents in many kinds of institutions often see their main problem as getting others to recognize and support what they—the reformers—already know to be necessary. We don’t need more information or more analysis and debate, we need action, and action requires support. History teaches us that the results of this line of reasoning can be magical or disastrous, depending on how well the reformers have done their homework and how willing they are to change direction or step aside!

For others, participation is first and last about democracy and “voice,” and it is assumed that substantive outcomes will be better, too, as long as participation is sincerely and actively promoted. Ownership or “buy-in” without a genuine commitment to opening up the process may be seen as manipulative, a way to

“manage consent,” as Frances Fox Piven and Richard Cloward termed it in *Poor People’s Movements: Why They Succeed, How They Fail*.

For others still—professionals or experts in a given field, for example, or public officials looking to “do more with less”—generating better substantive ideas may be first and foremost. For example, architects, product designers, community planners, and other professionals have long recognized the unique insights that come from design processes that include the non-professional users of the end product, whether it is a building, bus, chair, classroom, park, airplane, or something else. The same kinds of insights can obviously be useful where the product is a service.

It is not that users have all the great ideas. But they can be powerful sources of ideas as well as testers—or “sounding boards”—for ideas that may need refining, merging, or tossing out. Professionals and non-professionals simply have different kinds of expertise. The trick is making room for all of the genius in the room, if we can. But as we will see below, this takes more than giving every-

one “air time” (a chance to be heard).

There’s no reason to exalt any one of these rationales as always and everywhere the most important. Many participatory efforts seem to expect all of these benefits. But having one does not ensure producing the other. For example, a process that feels inclusive and fair can nevertheless recommend decisions that are substantively unwise, leading to lousy results, at least on the immediate substantive problem at hand—be it generating jobs, improving health care access, achieving more sustainable community growth, addressing the needs of out-of-school young people, or something else.

The key point is the first one: that the players may differ on why we should open up planning and decision-making, i.e., with what expected benefits.

*The Need to Focus (Be “Choosy”).* A second thing that should strike us about the list of “three reasons” is that it doesn’t do much to help us figure out when not to participate others in planning and deciding. Together, the three help make the case for wider participation, not for focusing or defining that participation.

If the old world offered far too much “top-down,” non-inclusive decision-making and action, the new one (still emerging) may offer too many unfocused versions of the alternative. After all, our ancestors long ago discovered the need for representative democracy—involving a smaller number of elected “agents” in big decisions that affected the community

Figure 2. Four Factors that Define Participation Strategy and Practice

<b>WHY</b>	<b>Purposes, given context and timing:</b> Collectively set a broad vision or issue “agenda” for public action? Develop a strategy around a given, pre-defined issue? Or “participatory design”—design a specific project or program to implement a given strategy?
<b>WHO</b>	<b>Players and their roles, given purposes:</b> Who sponsors, who meets, who facilitates, who generates and assesses ideas, who decides? Whose input is advisory and whose binding?
<b>WHAT</b>	<b>Issue and authority scope, given purposes and players:</b> What issues are or are not up for decision?
<b>HOW</b>	<b>Tactics, given purposes, players, and scope:</b> Organizing the stakeholders and issue agenda, assessing conditions in the world, convening, presenting and getting feedback, deliberating, deciding.

**How-to advice on participation techniques is often piecemeal. It may cover small-group facilitation process, for example, with great insight, but ignore the “big-group” political factors on which so much community problem-solving hinges.**

and letting others make the routine decisions that act on (implement) those broad community mandates. In other societies, those without elections or with limited elections, respected elders acted, and in some communities still act, as these agents. The community expects, nonetheless, that the wise leader will consult before deciding.

In the English language, we have two important expressions for the over-eager broadening of participation in situations that may call for more focus. One is “process paralysis,” which means consulting so constantly and so widely that progress is significantly stalled by input, even hostile bickering.

The second expression is “decision by committee.” It sounds innocuous enough, but we often employ it with a negative connotation: something relatively routine that might have been decided just as well or better by an individual or smaller circle was opened up for wider input. This may mean that in order to please everyone in the “committee,” the decision itself became so vague and non-committal that the outcome was worse than no decision at all. There is a leveling or lowest-common-denominator effect to some group involvement processes.

True, the quality of a process and an outcome is, to some degree, in the eye of the beholder, i.e., a matter of your perspective. After all, who gets to decide what decisions can be treated as “routine” and which call for broader “strategic” input? And aren’t there processes moving so fast with so little inclusion of stakeholder perspectives that some creative “stalling” may be justified?

“Yes” to both, no question. But let’s be willing to acknowledge the simple and ancient insight that more participation is not always and everywhere better. Par-

ticipation is work, and useful knowledge and relationships—two of the common products of participation—are precious resources to be cultivated, not self-generating goodies to be taken for granted.

If we’re willing to acknowledge those points, then we’re ready to get better at putting to use—in a critical way—the why’s, what’s, who’s, and how’s of effective participation. Along the way, we’ll look at some more real-world case examples to make sense of these issues.

**Defining Strategy: The Four Factors**

Figure 2 elaborates on the graphic model in Figure 1, outlining some of the most important factors that define participatory efforts around the world. There is a simple idea behind this set of factors, and it grows out of many, many hours of doing this work and training people who find they must learn to do it better. The idea is this: effective participation demands good strategy as much as good tactics.

Why is this distinction so important? Much advice on effective participation is tactical. It provides very specific how-to’s on operational tasks, for example recruiting participants, running public meetings, obtaining and presenting information (“facts” for discussion or debate), publicizing meeting results, creating committees or other sub-groups to continue work, and so on. The advice is appealing, because it is straightforward, very concrete, and seems to be grounded in hard-won lessons (read: “other people’s mistakes”).

It’s not that such advice is necessarily bad, only that it isn’t necessarily good—i.e., appropriate, complete, and promising—for every context. Also, such advice is often piecemeal. It may cover small-group facilitation process, for example, with great insight but ignore the “big-group” political factors on which so much community problem-solving hinges.

In a given community or organizational context, at a given point in time, some of the factors in Figure 2 may be deliberated widely—making the *shaping* of participation itself a tool for engaging participation—some deliberated just a little, and some not at all. Deliberating issues at the high end of this model is key to generating legitimacy, support, and ripe target issues on which players are motivated to work collectively. But deliberating issues at the bottom end of the model is crucial for making progress on

**TAKING STOCK (Part One)**

Questions to help you assess the situation in your community or organizational context that may make a (more) participatory planning and decision-making process valuable:

**Focal issue or problems:** Is better information required or mainly wider acceptance of public choices? For example, are alternative courses of action, costs, benefits, and risks known already? Does an impasse exist over best courses of action?

**Decision-makers:** Are they distant from the issues that motivate wider participation or perceived to be chronically ineffective? Is their legitimacy on the issue(s) significantly open to question?

**Stakeholders who would participate:** Are they known or identifiable? Are legitimate representatives available for each stakeholder group?

**Overall Goals:** Are our most important participation goals to generate wider acceptance, a more legitimate mandate for action, better information (including new action ideas) for problem-solving, or some combination of the above? How would potential participants rank these goals, and why?

concrete problems, for “planning while doing” and otherwise ensuring that planning actually leads to better action.

Let’s consider these factors one by one and begin to apply them to your community context.

## The Why: Defining Purposes in Context

First, why are we doing this, and why now? Getting clear on purposes—deliberating and consulting on them—is the step that decision-makers and other stakeholders often rush, taking it for granted. In the race to launch a process and invite input, a few general commitments are made, the importance of working together is duly underlined, meetings are held, and confusion follows.

To avoid this, take stock of your own situation (see text box). Before addressing the *why* of participation, in fact, address the *whether*: Is wider stakeholder participation in fact essential or desirable in the community or organizational context you care about? Try to define the nature of the issues or problems that motivate a participatory process, how decision-makers are positioned vis-à-vis the problems, who the key stakeholder participants would be, and what overall goals seem most important.

With some basic parameters of the situation and setting in hand, we turn to the stage or *context* for decision-making and action. There are distinct contexts, from broader to more specific, in which expanded and well-managed participation *might* be useful in a particular context at a particular point time. And I don’t mean “useful” because an enlightened few have declared that. I mean compelling or motivating to a variety of key players whose participation in decisions

and actions are considered important.

First, wide participation may be situation-driven and time-limited, as in most planning processes, or an institutionalized, ongoing element of how an organization or city or other unit is governed.

Next, three contexts for participation are crucial: first and most broadly, *agenda setting and visioning* (to define the issues for collective action, choosing language and symbols and stories to describe those issues); second, *strategy-making around a given issue*; and third and most specifically, *designing or fine-tuning a project or program* to action a given strategy. Let’s look at these one by one.

**Agenda setting and visioning: defining issues, shared values, language, and reference points for public action.**

Extraordinary efforts to engage stakeholders are often particularly valuable when richer, more legitimate, more deliberated, and more supportable ideas are needed about the overall direction of a community—be it a neighborhood or barrio, village or town, city, region, or nation—and the

ing thousands of members of the local community, has triggered projects that generated huge new private and public investment, new jobs, new civic institutions and habits, new cultural amenities, and more.

EnvisionUtah, outlined above, has also employed visioning with great success. Many other communities are learning visioning from these efforts. And DC Agenda, a nonprofit convener and policy research organization—a self-described “community building intermediary”—in Washington, DC has pursued a wide variety of engagement projects to generate more substantively informed and more widely supported responses to important community problems, such as fiscal crisis, housing affordability, and public school failure.

A newer generation of efforts employs computers and other information technology to support visioning by large groups—hundreds or even thousands of people at a time—in “electronic town meetings.” Using hand-held polling devices, lap-top computers, big-screen projection, and other tools, the nonprofit AmericaSpeaks designed and facilitated “citizens summits” for the Mayor of Washington, DC, and engaged almost 5,000 citizens in a forum to review plans for the redevelopment of Ground Zero in New York City. As I’ll outline below, the technology, which has important limitations, is meant to support public delibera-



**When important crises or changes affect a community and inclusive agenda setting and visioning does *not* happen, problem-solving work often confronts mistrust, poor coordination, and other barriers. Such was the case for Rebuild Los Angeles ...**

key issues that ought to be up for discussion at all.

Beginning in 1984, for example, Chattanooga, Tennessee used a substantively broad and socially inclusive visioning process to help turn around a declining economy, underperforming schools, and eroded quality of life. The Chattanooga Venture, a multi-racial, mixed-income visioning process involv-

tion—and to enable it to happen on a large scale, face-to-face.

Likewise, many community movements in the developing world start with broad agenda setting before defining more specific strategies. A single issue—such as the threat of removal for residents of a shantytown—may be the “trigger” for a broader effort to define a “community” and orient its members

***When it comes time to action a given strategy, stakeholder participation has a different value: providing vital insider (or “user”) information to inform specific design and management activities, including activities that the users or citizens themselves will lead.***

toward some kind of shared future.

When important crises or other changes affect a community and inclusive agenda setting and visioning does *not* happen, problem-solving work often confronts mistrust, a lack of coordination, and other barriers. Such was the case for Rebuild L.A., the high-profile nonprofit organization launched by business leaders in the wake of civil unrest in Los Angeles in 1992.

Agenda setting is often the most demanding participation purpose, because it can: reveal deep disagreements over how to think about or “frame” problems, highlight divergent assumptions about where the community is heading and why, uncover important conflicting interests that generate tension, and lead the public to question the work of a variety of institutions—not just government but non-governmental groups as well.

Of course, participation motivated by this set of purposes can also generate many corresponding positives in the process: more effective ways to frame problems so that many players can get involved in responding, a wider sense of shared responsibility for the overall direction of a community or institution, creative agreements that trade on differences in interest (“win-wins”) and present more credible ways to “split the difference” where finite resources must be divided, and strengthened stakeholder support for community institutions thanks to a credible process and better end results than stakeholders may have thought possible.

**Strategy-making around a given, pre-defined issue.** Stakeholders may already be in agreement, or through a broader stage like that outlined above, may generate agreement, on what issues belong on the community agenda—and how high. After brief discussion, crime or



jobs or education or water resources—or all four—may emerge as specific targets in need of better planning and better doing. An enormous amount of participatory planning around the world has this more specific strategy-making as its main purpose. Deep disagreements and many of the other dynamics that characterize agenda setting can also challenge these strategizing efforts, but as a rule, the latter are more focused, more tangible, and closer (chronologically) to concrete actions that can build momentum for change.

For example, in the South Bronx in New York City, by the early 1990s, a decade of rapid affordable housing development—more than that seen anywhere else in America—had left high-poverty neighborhoods densely built and without many of the staples of

a good community in which to raise families and do business—safe and attractive parks and other play spaces, strong neighborhood shopping, and more. In response, the foundation-sponsored Comprehensive Community Revitalization Program (CCRP) worked through six large and well-established nonprofit community development organizations to improve quality of life in six target neighborhoods.

As part of a larger demonstration effort to develop the organizations internally and help them launch a variety of community-serving projects and programs, CCRP funded a “Quality-of-Life Planning” process to engage residents, service agencies, and others in developing a variety of strategies for addressing priority issues identified by the participants themselves: crime, housing, parks, schools, jobs, and more. With additional input from public agencies, business, and philanthropic funders, the process was designed to ensure that funding and other vital resources would be available to act on the plans quickly.

**Developing or fine-tuning programs or projects to action a given strategy (Participatory Design).** Many strategic plans, whether for physical spaces, programs, an organization’s “product line,” or something else, do not include detailed activity “roadmaps.” When it comes time to *action* a given strategy, participation has a different value: providing vital insider (or “user”) information to inform specific design and management activities, including activities that the users or citizens themselves will lead.

For example, how should a new youth center be sited and connected with surrounding facilities and streets? What

**TAKING STOCK (Part Two)**

Questions to help you define the overall purposes of participation, in context:

**From General to Specific.** Can we outline a continuum of issues and ideas, from the specific to the general, that are, or ought to be, under discussion? Are the key stakeholders more prepared for the more general or more specific discussion? Why? Which seems more important now and to whom?

**Context.** Are we prepared to define the context—as agenda setting, strategy-making, or participatory project or program design? With whom should we consult about this? Are we prepared to shift the process (zoom in or out) to address more general or more specific concerns that emerge? To include new players and their concerns over time?

should the hours of a community vaccination program be, and how clinic-based versus “out in the community” should it be?

Sometimes, engaging stakeholder input in these specifics is part of a savvy delivery strategy that aims to make community members “co-implementers” or “natural helpers.” That is, the users are also producers via their access to networks, time and expertise (in-kind labor),



encouragement and endorsement, and more. Taken too far, of course, engaging stakeholders in this kind of self-help is more than just savvy. It may reflect the abandonment of public obligations to community charity and pure self-reliance.

In the South Bronx CCRP example above, the comprehensive plan for each neighborhood identified a variety of specific, high priority, community-supported projects—from new playgrounds to expanded primary health projects, from job generators to neighborhood beautification. The nonprofit and other organizations involved then engaged residents and other participants in designing, and in some cases in managing, those projects.

Many designers, whether of physical spaces or of social programs, have written up insightful case experiences on the why and how of participatory approaches. Because this third type of participation opportunity sharpens questions

of expertise and who makes final decisions that lead to concrete action, being clear on these upfront, or negotiating them effectively over time, are especially important.

Now it’s time to take stock again, reflecting on the key purposes that might define a participation strategy in your community or organization (see text box below).

## The Who: Defining Players and Their Roles

Now we’re talking process design: who will be included, what will they do, and when? Answering these questions tends to be easier—not to say easy—once purposes are clear and make some sense to all involved. This is not to say that the big questions defining participatory work can necessarily be answered in a linear fashion. But in general, the “who” and the “why” should each be defined with the other

**The usual big questions of representative democracy arise: Did anyone elect the representatives, or under what basis do they legitimately serve? How representative are they? When can they act, and when must they consult with—or get their actions formally “ratified” by—those they are supposed to represent?**

in mind. Some of the most important roles and their functions are these:

- *Organizers help identify and gather those with tangible stakes, help prepare them on the issues, and help them think about how to participate in a larger process (or develop their own) in order to have influence. The organizing role is particularly important where key stakeholders have long been disenfranchised in a community or on a given set of issues confronting that community. Organizing can take many forms. (Another note in this series looks in depth at organizing—its power and its challenges.)*

- *Sponsors/Conveners typically invite the participation and take responsibility for sponsoring and/or accommodating gatherings or other arenas for exchange (e.g. on-line). Sponsors not only bring their interests but their reputations—or political “baggage,” as we say in English—to the process, and this baggage may be both good and bad. A history of involvement on an issue can make someone credible and otherwise influential; but that history may also signal bias or stubbornness on the issues and stakes. Furthermore, the sponsors may be those who provide the resources that support a process or may channel such resources from donors who do not participate directly.*
- *Contributors are those who, literally, contribute the input that is the “core currency” of participation. Ideally, such input includes: what issues matter, how they should be thought about, what actions should be considered*

*in response, and how those actions should be evaluated and prioritized.*

- *Deciders are those who make authoritative decisions using contributors’ input (we hope). Where an advisory*

*mechanism is used to generate input, deciders are often elected or appointed officials (in government) or managers (private and nonprofit). Where contributors cannot decide directly, for example through voting at large on important and well-defined decisions, their agents (representatives) may perform this role. If the latter, the usual big questions of representative democracy arise: did anyone elect the representatives, or under what basis do they legitimately serve? How representative are the “representatives”? How clear is their mandate? When can they act, and when must they consult with—or get their actions formally “ratified”*

*Ignoring these roles and the distinctions between them can leave a community's efforts stretched thin with too little capacity, confused in terms of who is responsible for what, and stuck if important functions are not being fulfilled by anyone.*

by—those they are supposed to represent?

And two *support roles*:

- *Facilitators* help participants manage exchange—to uncover assumptions and information gaps, promote learning, generate consensus, and more. The tasks may range from “meeting facilitation” (facilitating live discussion) to a variety of process decisions that relate to educating and engaging participants over time (for example, what will happen in the important periods between meetings or other gatherings?). Sometimes, facilitators are trained professionals that work in many communities—and therefore may bring important perspective and also blind spots (face a “learning curve”)—and sometimes they are community insiders who bring key interests, insights, and biases to the role. Recent studies of community participation in public education, public safety, and a variety of other arenas emphasize the importance of providing fledgling participation efforts, often based in neighborhoods or smaller cities with little experience in such work, with tools and advice on facilitation, at minimum.
- *Analysts* are those who provide information support for deliberation and decision-making, often by (a) collecting and analyzing raw data with citizens’ and decision-makers’ information needs in mind and (b) presenting (reporting back) the results of such analysis in various media (words, numbers, pictures, even sound). For example, there may be community surveys, market research, studies of land use or program utilization, census analyses, and more. Like facilitation, analysis may be done by com-

munity insiders, outside professionals, players who straddle these categories, or a combination of the two. Some information technology advances—e.g., simulation software, geographic information systems, and more—support this function in terrific ways. But information is only as valuable as it is accessible to and well-organized for those who must use it. Mountains of data are of limited value if not well-incorporated, capably analyzed to focus on key “stories” the data tell, and effectively discussed in a larger process. More on this below.

It takes a variety of capacities to perform well in these roles, and a given player—a “resident leader,” for example—may be willing and able to play several roles in a single process (e.g., convener, facilitator, adviser, decider).

On the other hand, most players should probably avoid trying to fulfill two or more roles that pose conflicting demands. For example, the demand that *analysts* be as objective and impartial as possible and that *contributors* can (and should) express preferences, including strong ones. Contributors may need or want to be their own analysts,



whether because doing this work provides important learning opportunities or because resources to hire professional analysts are limited, or both.

This is the case in many grassroots organizing or participatory action efforts around the world, where a key aim is to avoid undue reliance on outside expertise and outsider assumptions. Straddling the analyst and contributor roles seems to be doable but calls for extra effort to distinguish one’s personal views from what the evidence indicates. And insider views are not always more accurate or otherwise better, particularly where tough technical realities must be understood and confronted.

Finally, it is rare for players in a process to wear labels that identify them in such neat-and-clean roles. But these are, in effect, the roles that seem to recur

**TAKING STOCK (Part Three)**

Questions to help you make sense of the players and their roles:

**Defining roles.** Have we, or can we, define the core contributors and deciders whose ideas should drive the process? How about organizers, sponsors, facilitators, and analysts?

**Capacity.** What makes the individuals or groups in our community or organizational context well suited to those roles? What additional skills and capacities may be needed, and how can we build them or acquire them?

**Role straddling and role confusions.** What are the most helpful ways in which the same individuals or players can play multiple roles in our process? What confusions or conflicts of interest might arise, and how should we handle them? What guidelines (ground rules) or other restrictions might help? What positive incentives can we create?

again and again in many settings, regardless of the substantive issues up for discussion (health, environment, labor, etc.), the shape of a community's assets and needs, the context for participatory engagement (agenda setting, strategy-making, or participatory project design), and the mix of players and interests involved.

Having key roles in mind can help us discuss them, resource them, get people to take responsibility for them, and offer updates and clarification on them (e.g., on role "switches"). Ignoring these roles and the distinctions between them can leave a community's efforts stretched thin with too little capacity, confused in terms of who is responsible for what, and stuck if important functions are not being fulfilled by anyone.

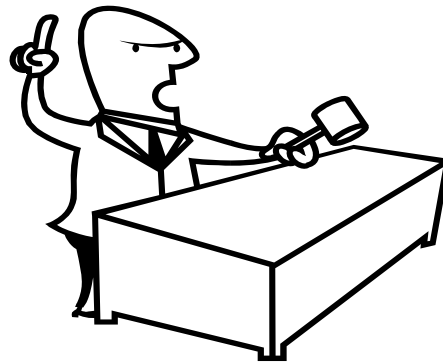
In addition, Bill Potapchuk of the Community Building Institute recommends that those organizing and managing a participatory decision-making process may find it helpful to distinguish among ...

- *Primary stakeholders*, who participate intensively as a "core group" intensively engaged in learning, discussion, and even formal facilitated consensus building or dispute resolution. The people who participate are often representatives of organizations or identified stakeholder groups;
- *Secondary stakeholders*, who engage episodically through some form of public involvement, such as open community meetings; and
- The *public(s) at-large*, for whom public education is needed and appropriate.

Some processes are designed to put the core group in dialogue with the wider public on a regular basis at large community gatherings. This allows the smaller working body, which meets more often, to make use of experts and other information resources and to prepare the issues for wider community discussion. News-

letters, public service announcements, and other broad public education mechanisms keep an even wider group informed (see below).

For example, the nonprofit-led South Bronx neighborhood planning effort outlined above made use of these multiple levels of intensive discussion and decision, wider public involvement, and (widest) public education. But so do government-initiated consensus building processes that tackle resource management policies for a large



**Who will *decide* and whose input will be merely *advisory*? Traditionally, there have been two extreme schools of thought on this: Give stakeholders complete control—i.e., always empower them to make the ultimate decisions under discussion—or never do so.**

regional watershed or complex regulatory policymaking for an entire nation.

### The What: Defining Scope

Imagine that some problem-solving process underway in our community has identified an overall purpose for participation that makes sense given our history and the needs and opportunities visible to us right now. Imagine further that we've had some discussion of the roles that need playing, who should play them, and what support they will need. Now what?

Tensions often arise when the players on the "other side" of the room (or community) have a very different set of ideas about factor three—what should

or shouldn't be up for discussion and what the scope of decision-making authority for a participatory process should be.

Some of the tension may owe to simple miscommunication, and conflict over scope can be a useful tool for discussing and ultimately resolving the issues—or agreeing that such differences exist that a single process cannot be run as planned. Facing and working through differences is often a key to learning, not automatically a barrier to learning and progress. (See the strategy tool in this series, "We are all negotiators now: An introduction to negotiation in community problem-solving.")

But in some cases, nothing has been explicitly decided about scope. The process is wandering, participants differ in significant ways on their *assumptions* about scope, and no one has addressed this problem.

Like the "who" of participation, the "what" should have some logical relationship to the "why." That is, the scope of what we're discussing should reflect the overall purposes that drive our work together.

For example, if broad agenda setting and visioning makes sense to us, then our discussion will not include highly specific project design—not yet. In the South Bronx case, participants were diplomatically dissuaded from focusing on the details of projects while the broadly-framed neighborhood plans were in development. Some small and very do-able projects were seized on and pursued quickly as a way to build momentum for the larger tasks ahead, but the planning groups couldn't make progress, all at once in any given meeting or other event, on both the very broad and the very specific.

On the other hand, if working on such specifics is appropriate for us right now, and a process has been designed to sup-

port that, then discussions of big-picture agenda-setting ideas ought to be tabled or channeled into another effort. Yes, progress on the general can lead us to the more specific, but the specific can lead to the more general, too, especially if we find that we do not have enough leverage on their problems to work on them effectively through project design alone.

Examples of this are many and varied. In Miami Beach, an effort to organize low-income parents to plan and run their own “homework club” in a local public school led to broad discussions about rapidly rising housing costs, low wages, and other problems facing low-income families in the community. Not only did the parents share concerns in a general way; they came to see that supporting their children’s schooling would have little lasting value if larger problems forced their families to leave the community altogether. The specific led back to the bigger picture and, specifically, to uncovering urgent common concerns beyond the education of children.

Back in the South Bronx, the City and State of New York, following the legal requirements for land use approval, re-



quested public input on a major new courthouse project. Beyond suggesting ways to mitigate the negative spillovers of this public mega-project, an expanded community planning process addressed a wide variety of problems and opportunities that the new development might influence, from jobs for neighborhood residents to community library technology, from a new high school organized around themes of social justice to transportation needs long overlooked in the area. Not only did public input go beyond physical design, but the discussion began to focus on ways to leverage the

new project for more comprehensive community development.

Just as important is the *scope of decision-making authority*. Who will decide and whose input will be merely advisory? Traditionally, there have been two extreme schools of thought on this: Give stakeholders complete control—i.e., always empower them to make the ultimate decisions under discussion—or never do so.

The first school of thought assumes that participation cannot be meaningful unless the participators are allowed to actually decide, i.e., ceded or devolved the authority to make key decisions directly.

The second school of thought assumes, conversely, that only elected officials and appointed managers working in the broad public interest can protect the community from parochial, “special” interests. Those who wish to retain decision-making for public officials also stress that citizens, nonprofit groups, businesses, and other stakeholders often lack the specialized expertise of government planners and policy analysts.

As I outlined above, much of the demand for wider stakeholder participation in planning and decision-making—and not just by government—reflect a loss of faith in official expertise and legitimacy. In other words, representative democracy and technocratic

**There are many ways to balance engagement aims with the aim of ensuring wider public accountability—something that implies effective and even activist government, *beyond* community engagement.**

bureaucracy are not enough. But nor can the objectives for which they were designed be tossed aside. Representing and reconciling multiple interests *are* important. And so is bringing multiple forms of expertise to bear on public problems. Where significant expertise resides in public agencies, for example, it should not be wasted—or worse yet, ignored because it generates hard

truths that are politically inconvenient in a community.

How do we reconcile these needs for expertise, a capacity to represent broadly and resolve competing interests, *and* promote wider direct engagement by stakeholders in decisions that matter?

Let’s briefly consider three examples. In the Brazilian cities mentioned at the beginning of this strategy tool—Porto Alegre, Belém, and dozens of others as well—special representatives chosen by citizens review neighborhood’s requests for public funding. These representatives are citizen planners and policymakers, not agency professionals. As The World Bank explains in its on-line sourcebook on “Empowerment Tools and Practices,” these citizen planners rank budget requests in order of priority, based on input by citizens at-large at major public meetings. These ranked budget priorities are not advisory only, but nor are they final and binding. The City’s Mayor and elected councilors make the final budget decisions based both on the citizen rankings and a set of quantitative criteria reflecting population size and need indicators across neighborhoods. The outcomes, then, are a product of both citizen deliberations and several forms of representative democracy at work. Under the Brazilian participatory budgeting model, citizens also review progress on the previous cycle’s priorities and monitor government expenditures (the data are made

widely available).

In the city of Chelsea, Massachusetts, a group of citizen representatives joined a “charter preparation team” to create a new city charter in 1993. Chelsea, an economically depressed small city just outside Boston, had been temporarily stripped of the right to govern itself, following repeated corruption by the City’s elected officials and a deep fiscal crisis.

**TAKING STOCK (Part Four)**

Questions to help you define the scope of participatory planning and decision-making in your own community context:

**Issues.** What should define the substantive focus of our planning? What key themes or places lie at the heart, which are more tangential, and why? Under what circumstances might issues beyond the boundaries or scope be included? On what specific types of decisions and actions should we focus? What mechanisms and ground rules should we use to stay focused yet provide opportunities to revisit the issue and decision scope over time?

**Advising versus Deciding.** Is the mechanism of participation empowered to advise decision-makers or to decide directly? If the latter, what is the nature and extent of that decision-making authority? For example, will the participants decide how to rank action proposals or define criteria that decision-makers should apply to them—but not actually choose among the proposals? What mechanisms will ensure representation? How will informal civil society or “community” initiatives relate to formal government jurisdiction and authorities?

The state government appointed a receiver—the closest we get to a “legitimate autocrat” in democratic societies—to straighten out the City’s finances and temporarily act as chief executive until a new government could be formed. But rather than im-

pose a new charter on the Chelsea community, Harry Spence, the receiver, asked that a structured consensus building process be used to craft a charter with significant citizen input. As Susan Podziba, the facilitator for the process, explains in *The Consensus Building Handbook*, Spence believed that members of the community not only had important ideas to share but would be more engaged over the long term if they helped define a structure that would make their local government more honest, accountable, and responsive.

With citizen engagement and trust in government at an all-time low, however, the consensus process did not rely on formal elections to choose the core

group—the Charter Preparation Team—that would work with experts and the facilitator to develop a draft charter. The process instead relied on three levels of participation: three selectors considered to be “highly moral” (a

**The “final” decision-making reflected important, empowered roles for citizens at large, special representatives chosen for the specific purpose of addressing local government failure and crafting a new charter, and the receiver who authorized the process and stood behind it.**



pastor, a newspaper editor, and a high school principal) chose the team

members from 70 applications submitted; the team of 18 member, included 12 citizens and 6 elected officials, then developed a consensus charter proposal through its own group meetings and large public-input meetings facilitated by citizens who had been trained; and after several iterations of public input and response by the Charter Prep Team, a full proposal was put to the citizens in a formal, city wide vote—at

which it won approval.

Not only did the process reflect the wisdom we reviewed earlier—about finding roles for contributors, deciders, facilitators, analysts, a sponsor (the receiver who lent the process formal, state-granted authority), and others—but the “final” decision-making reflected important, empowered roles for citizens at large, special representatives chosen for the specific purpose of addressing local government failure and crafting a new charter, and the receiver who authorized the process and stood behind it.

Finally, there are many examples of community planning and development that reflect empowered roles for citizens as well as important public safeguards managed by elected officials and their professional staffs—i.e., a balance of active civil society engagement beyond government and of formal government authority.

For instance, the non-profit Dudley Street Neighborhood Initiative in inner-city Boston, which I mentioned earlier, elects residents and service providers to its Board of Directors through a vigorous grassroots organizing effort that canvasses the entire neighborhood, operating

in the five languages in use there. The directors govern the organization, working with professional staff and volunteers. But where public resources and authorities are concerned, e.g., land use regulation in the Dudley neighborhood or public investments (analogous to those debated in Porto Alegre, Brazil), the Initiative must deal with local and state government bodies much like a private party. As chronicled in *Streets of Hope*, a vivid account of the Initiative’s history, the organization is not a state unto itself but supplements formal elected representation, engaging people and organizations in the neighborhood in an ongoing process to define and implement a meaningful community development agenda. That is, “empowerment” helps define how the organization is governed and

propelled forward. It is not that a citizen-driven non-governmental organization has become government.

The point is that there are many ways to balance engagement aims with the aim of ensuring wider public accountability—something that implies effective and even activist government, beyond community engagement. These “ways” are sometimes call “institutional designs” because they define structures and routines of decision-making meant to balance multiple objectives. They include more and more roles for citizens and non-governmental parties in monitoring, informing, and supplementing formal public planning and decision-making. (For more, see the resource list at the end of this tool.)

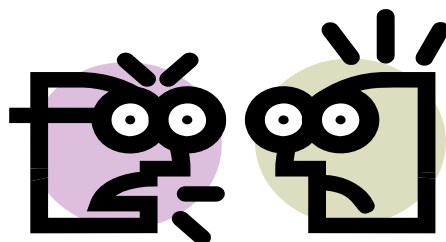
Don’t forget to take stock above before we move on.

## If we build it, will they come? And will it matter?

How do we make participation meaningful, especially for who have not been traditionally involved and who may be disadvantaged because they are materially poor, information poor, or otherwise less well-resourced?

OK, so effective participation calls for good strategy—answering some of the big questions about why, who, and what

**Managers reacted tensely to “gripe and grievance” sessions with their clients—sessions that might have been structured differently—while residents participated unevenly, expecting that important decisions had already been made.**



outlined above—and not just savvy tactics that address the how. Before we take a look at the latter, though (because tactics are important too), let’s think some more about what we expect in terms of why others would want to participate with us and what that participation might involve.

To echo the proverb on the first page—about the making of ham and eggs—the fact that someone or some group participates does not mean that they did so as a matter of informed choice, nor that their participation necessarily benefits them.

In the late 1960s, while progressive community action and “advocacy plan-

ning” to address society’s ills were at a peak in the U.S. and other countries, a number of insightful observers highlighted the folly of making strong assumptions about the motivation, opportunity, and capacity to participate meaningfully in planning and decision-making—and to obtain significant benefits in the process.

In 1969, for example, Richard Bolan, a planning educator and planner active in inner-city community development efforts in the U.S., identified those three as crucial—motivation, opportunity, skills. Bolan worried that so-called participation efforts would become a new excuse for blaming the disadvantaged if not designed to address these factors.

Sherry Arnstein, a contemporary of Bolan’s, likewise worried that participation could be little more than cynical manipulation or “citizen therapy” without real influence, especially where citizens and professional experts could not communicate effectively with one another. At

Figure 3. Motivation, Opportunity, Skills: Participation Assumptions and Realities

FACTOR	Institutions’ Common Assumptions About What Counts for Stakeholders	Common Stakeholder Realities
<b>Motivation</b>	The stakes as we see them, why “they” should care and participate (given our authoritative knowledge of the issues and/or our responsibility to lead public	Very different vantage point and knowledge about the issues, varied priorities. Motivation may be lacking or—more often—focused on other issues or ways of framing the issues. The would-be sponsor/convener may not be trusted or credible in the eyes of the stake-
<b>Opportunity</b>	If we set the “table” (create a forum for participation), they will come. (We design fora that work for us, we do what we know how to do to solicit input.)	Stakeholders may participate, given time, money, or other resources to allow participation via channels that are both visible and accessible (which may or may not match the channels that institutions are willing and readily able to create).
<b>Skills</b>	Technical skills and know-how (trained expertise), knowledge on the substantive issues under discussion, access to formal data.	Need for technical skill and strategic “public life” skills (for understanding political interests, persuading, active listening, using shared decision-making methods), plus other “soft” skills (confidence in groups, ability to work productively with others’ authority, tolerance for ambiguity, complexity, and incomplete information.

***Effective participatory work should not substitute uncoached “stakeholder views” for views informed by technical expertise but rather enhance citizen know-how, improve what experts understand as well, and produce better outcomes through dialogue.***

high levels on her “ladder of citizen participation,” citizens are given partnership, delegated power, or even given complete control over key resources.

Many others since, and not only in the U.S., have similarly criticized the structuring of participation that neither ensures wide and meaningful participation nor a wide sharing its benefits. Usually, the participation concern is for “the public” at-large and for historically disadvantaged groups in particular. Sometimes, the concern is for the interests of non-governmental organizations or businesses.

Step back for a moment from all this change in the world and from the hopes we have for better informing what *institutions* do to affect our lives, and we see a blind spot in many of these no doubt important concerns and criticisms. It’s rare that we take time to develop specific ideas about how government, nonprofits, and even businesses that serve the public interest should learn and act differently in an era of more participatory planning and decision-making.

Let me clarify this. There are many ideas about how institutions should become more *responsive* to what we tell them we want—to our feedback, that is. But there is little recognition of the fact that the institutions themselves need new skills and capacities to engage with citizens in a new kind of problem-solving where expertise, resources, and decisions are all shared more widely.

Organizations often stumble on the strategy questions discussed above—why participation, with whom, how, when and how much, about what?—and generate mixed messages. Participation is “tacked onto” many other organizational tasks. Skill and other capacity to promote it effectively are given little if any atten-

tion.

Some years back, two colleagues and I, in a study of the social effects of community development in U.S. cities, found that this *organizational capacity to manage in a more participatory way* was under-developed even in respected “community-based” nonprofit organizations that interacted regularly with resident clients and held community participation as a core commitment or ethos. Managers reacted tensely to “gripe and grievance” sessions with their clients—sessions that might have been structured differently—while residents participated unevenly, expecting that important decisions had already been made.

In broad terms, we need new civic skills at three levels of society that are important for public problem-solving:

- The *individual* level: being able to define our interests and link them to the interests of others, having interpersonal and other “soft” skills needed to participate in public process (e.g., being persuasive as well as persuadable), and being able to learn technical aspects of public problems that need attention;
- The *organizational* level: being able to define and link core processes of the organization to important public objectives on which participation may be required, whether continuously or at key intervals; being able to blend managerial expertise with that of citizens or clients; being able to articulate the value added by stakeholder engagement in organizational planning and decision-making, so that those who resource the organization’s work understand that value; and
- The *community* level: being able to

integrate multiple forms and channels of participation; having a repertoire of mechanisms for resolving disputes among various stakeholders or “publics”; balancing multiple objectives of participation.

Figure 3 organizes and expands on these insights, culled over many years in many places, about what it takes to make participation meaningful and beneficial. It distinguishes what folks inside institutions assume—“looking out” on participation they want to generate—from on-the-ground realities as stakeholders commonly perceive and experience them.

The figure gives us a basis for evaluating tactics for recruiting, engaging, and informing people—the tactics about which there is a great deal of “how to” advice out there. Finally, the figure gives us a way of keeping in view the two-way learning and adapting that participatory work seems to demand—by people *and* by the institutions that serve them.

Figure 3 reminds us to think through the “opportunity” channels that participatory efforts create from the standpoint of those for whom participation is supposedly an opportunity. Why invest in any effort that places important barriers of time, money, language ability, and more in the way? Why assume that the “publics”—various publics we may want to engage—will respond to business meetings of the kind we run inside our organization?

Then there are the skills gaps of two kinds:

## 1. Technical Skills

*First are the important technical skills which institutions work so hard to acquire and—sometimes—to update.* Land use, transportation, health service delivery, finance, environmental science, housing, job markets and workforce development. And more.

As we saw above, participation should be more than citizen therapy—inclusion for inclusion’s sake. Effective participatory work should not substitute uncoached “stakeholder views” for views informed by technical expertise but rather enhance citizen know-how, improve what experts understand as well,

and produce better outcomes through dialogue.

Archon Fung and Erik Olin Wright, who have studied local-level participatory democracy at work around the world, had this to say about the output of participatory budgeting in Kerala and West Bengal, India:

Some villages produced what appear to be thoughtful plans with high levels of direct participation, [but] many others failed to produce any plans at all. For

those plans that were submitted, many were poorly integrated, had poor credit and financing schemes, and the projects within them were sometimes ill conceived or simply mimicked bureaucratic boilerplate.

“Bureaucratic boilerplate” is a generous description of what other bottom-up planning efforts have produced.

In the Bedford-Stuyvesant neighborhood of Brooklyn, New York, where



**Those of us who spend much of our lives in institutions have built up a knowledge of how they behave and how to “navigate” them. We weren’t born with this knowledge.**

many feel modern community development was born in America, the State of New York attempted, in the early 1990s, to spur holistic, participatory planning for the neighborhood’s revitalization in exchange for special designations that would bring investment, regulation, and other benefits. But little facilitation, analysis, or other supports were provided to neighborhood organizations,

and little or no guidance was provided by the State on what a “holistic neighborhood plan” should include or how it might be prepared and evaluated.

The result? An unfocused neighborhood “plan” that laundry listed economic development and other project ideas, some of which would hardly be feasible anywhere in urban America. There was no market or other analysis, no organization to the disparate parts, and few indicators, for that matter, of the who or what of participation that informed

the plan. The plan was no plan but a wish list, as unhelpful to the community as no plan at all—or worse, since such work-products tend to deepen stigmas about poor people and their neighborhoods. As planning professional and educator John Shapiro puts it, “There used to be planning by the community without the [professional] planners. And that didn’t work so well. Ditto for planning by the planners without the community. The trick is engaging both.”

Residents and other core contributors need not bring all the technical skills to planning and other problem-solving work. They are experts of a special kind, bringing insider information on conditions—both needs and assets available for responding to needs—and, of course, bringing legitimacy as the ultimate voice of their own interests. Meanwhile, trained professionals expert in substantive fields that are relevant to the planning effort underway can be allies who inform and refine citizen deliberation. But professionals and other *outside* experts can also be “gadflies” who challenge citizens to think about problems, opportunities, and action options in new ways.

## 2. Public life skills

A second type of skills gap relates to “public life” skills and other soft skills required to work effectively with others. Those of us who spend much of our lives in institutions have built up a knowledge of how they behave and how to “navigate” them. If we work in the public interest,

### DEFINING SUCCESS

Ideas from *Deepening Democracy* (2003), by Fung and Wright:

1. Does the project or forum promote and realize democratic values of *effective* and *fair* public action? Does it do so *better* than structures that were in place before?
2. Is the effort able to achieve its goals even under conditions of social and economic *inequality* and *diversity*? Are the advisory and/or decision-making bodies representative of those with a stake in the key outcomes?
3. Are there effective mechanisms in place to foster coordination and the spread of innovations *among* participation efforts?
4. Does the effort promote new *civic engagement*? Does it draw in previously marginalized or uninvolved groups?
5. Does the effort serve as a positive *learning* environment or “school of democracy”?
6. Does the effort place a high value on rational argument, i.e. *power* or *influence* through *persuasion* rather than domination? Does the effort foster a genuinely *deliberative* environment, enabling respect, focused attention, and patience to allow an airing of all sides of an issue?
7. Are the decision-making processes *transparent* (clear, visible) and *comprehensible* to all involved?
8. Are there sufficient resources to act on plans or decisions?

To this list, let’s add a *ninth* question:

9. Does the effort promote a meaningful consideration of uncertainties (related to the substantive issues under discussion) and address factors over which the community may have limited control?

## Good planning gives us more leverage in a world of risk and limited control. But there's no such thing as a sure thing.



we have also learned about the “big p” politics of community life—how to think about the bigger public issues underlying private “troubles” or grievances, how government works, why most important change in the world requires *coalitions* of interest groups, what it means to change the other side’s options and expand our own so as to gain more leverage (or “power”).

We have also learned about the “small p” politics of group situations—reading other people’s interests, persuading, being persuaded, reciprocity (give-and-take). This is the stuff of life in organizations, especially for middle-class professionals with college degrees.

We weren’t born with these types of knowledge and skill. More to the point, some of the stakeholders we wish to engage have these types of knowledge and skill, while others lack them. A variety of approaches can address this effectively: training in labor or community “organizing” often includes these skills and more; “community leadership programs” emphasize these fundamentals of public life; and sometimes training, pilot projects, and other skill development opportunities along these lines are part of more recently developed curricula in “community building” (see, e.g., the curriculum developed by the Boston Community Building Network and Interaction

Institute for Social Change).

*How to define success?* In *Deepening Democracy*, scholars Archon Fung and Erik Olin Wright define a number of useful success criteria for institutions or processes that aim for deliberation and participatory democracy (see text box).

Poor social outcomes don’t always mean that planning was poorly designed or run. Smart planning should *support* implementation, but the former can’t guarantee that implementation will go smoothly. What’s more, important factors over which the players have limited control may outpace even the best-laid plans and implementation

efforts. For example, massive changes in the economy can generate unemployment and business failure in a community even if economic development planning and implementation were first rate. The questions are whether the uncertainties and external factors were ever talked about and whether participants were given a chance to think creatively about mitigating the shocks.

Good planning gives us *more* leverage in a world of risk and limited control. But there’s no such thing as a sure thing.

### Smart Tactics: More than a bag of tricks

We end where most how-to guides and case reports of participatory problem-solving begin: with the concrete, *operational* tactics that make participation “run” in practice. I’ll briefly highlight some of the most important type of tactics here, tie them back to the strategy

Figure 4. Key Participation Tactics and Tools, by Task Area

TACTICS FOR	CORE CONCEPTS
<b>1. Organizing issues and stakeholders</b>	Identify stakeholders (often by group) and help them define their interests in key issues, use early gatherings to build an agenda for collective attention, build “indigenous leadership” (share ownership). More and more efforts combine traditional face-to-face relationship building and recruitment with broadcast, internet, and multi-media outreach and education.
<b>2. Building a common knowledge base, and analyzing opportunities and problems</b>	Identify information needs (issues, decisions needed, info to support decision, data that underlie the info), resources available to collect and analyze needed data. Identify community assets, not just needs or deficiencies; “logic model” causes and effects to come up with more viable action ideas.
<b>3. Presenting and giving feedback</b>	Think about different ways people communicate and learn (words, pictures, numbers, sound) and how these combine to create “stories” about public issues and responsibilities.
<b>4. Deliberating</b>	Enable dialogue (where learning can happen), not just debate (contests of opinions). Rely on ground rules and facilitators to make progress and protect relationships. Take breaks to “cool down,” but don’t squelch disagreement. Use side meetings to help resolve deep conflicts.
<b>5. Deciding</b>	Think creatively about how to decide. Decision rules have pros and cons: Rely on majority vote? Aim for full consensus? Prepare for controversial decisions using creative group processes (switch roles, play devil’s advocate, etc.).

questions on which we have focused so far, and suggest some further reading and other resources for improving practice.

In general, practitioners and researchers typically identify the following as mechanisms or methods of *obtaining* participation (input and possibly deliberation):

- Study circles
- Focus groups
- Public meetings, including hearings
- Community surveys and referenda
- Charettes, brainstorming, and workshops
- Other tools are for *disseminating* information, for example:
- Public service announcements and press releases
- Fliers, newsletters, reports
- Public exhibits and oral briefings

What are these and other tactics *for*? What are the key tasks? Below, Figure 4 identifies them. If participatory problem-solving is, in the final analysis, about putting people and information together to produce both new relationships and tangible break-through results, then these tasks suggest how, in a kind of democratic recipe, we can add people, add information, and “stir” in useful directions.

## 1. Organizing

At its simplest and least thoughtful, *stakeholder organizing* is little more than recruiting “them” into our show. As outlined above, we know what’s valuable and why they should participate. It’s pure marketing. With some background work done on participants interests as they define them, though, recruitment is done by and under the guidance of the core stakeholders themselves. What’s more, the marketing element includes much more animated and straightforward “hooks”—such as the ones on a flyer distributed in my inner-city Boston neighborhood recently:

Dorchester rents rose 67% from 1995 to 1999, but wages stagnated. Are you or your neighbor being forced out? The neighborhood is changing! How can we support

community improvement without causing displacement? What does housing affordability mean to you? WE WANT TO HEAR WHAT YOU THINK!!! Everyone is invited ... Free Food, Child Care ...

At its best, organizing is much more than outreach and marketing, of course. It builds a constituency for action by building relationships and capacity to act. It directly enables democratic agenda setting by putting big issues up for discussion through a group process



of give-and-take and clarification, by helping participants define the stakes of those issues in their own lives or the lives of their constituents. Effective organizing is essential to good participatory planning, and planning is crucial to organizing. (See another strategy tool in this series on how stakeholder organizing is defined and pursued, on why it is so important to collective problem-solving.)

***If participatory problem-solving is, in the final analysis, about putting people and information together to produce both new relationships and tangible break-through results, then these tactics suggest how, in a kind of democratic recipe, we can add people, add information, and “stir” in useful directions.***

## 2. Building a Knowledge Base and Analyzing Problems Well

*Building a common knowledge base*—turning a community or set of stakeholders that may be “information poor” into one that is empowered by information—is critical if participatory problem-solving is to do more than pool the experiences of those affected by community problems. Knowledge building can run from fairly technical analyses of formally collected data, including statistical indicators and computer maps to collecting and creatively presenting video narratives in which elders tell the history of a community and young people express hopes for the future. Knowledge building is crucial to all of the contexts for participatory planning, and the more technical forms tend to loom especially large in the most specific contexts (strategy-making, project or program design).

More and more, as John Kretzmann and John McKnight have emphasized, collective action around important issues should identify and build on the assets of a community or group, not just record deficiencies. Kretzmann and McKnight have made available mapping tools and guides to “finding and mobilizing a community’s assets.” In this tool, I use “problem” as a shorthand for “problems and opportunities” that make important targets for joint action. I don’t mean to suggest we should work only on the negatives. The wisdom of including assets applies not only to physical communities—neighborhoods—of course, but to organization and networks as well.

It’s also extremely important to think hard about the data collected, to analyze problems and opportunities carefully,

even to invite outside opinions. “Logic modeling” provides a straightforward recipe for outlining causes and effects that matter for changing a condition in the world—school failure, infant mortality, high unemployment, or some other condition—in a desired direction. Logic models are “A-leads-to-B-leads-to-C” pathways that force participants to test their assumptions about what really drives problems and what can drive change. (The W.K. Kellogg Foundation makes a free guide to logic modeling available on its website.)

### 3. Presenting and Getting Feedback

Building knowledge is hardly a mere process of collecting facts. It’s an area of constant innovation and experimentation. Some of that experimentation happens not in collecting or analyzing data to support decision-making but in presenting the information and getting meaningful feedback from stakeholders. (And see the tool, “Learning Together,” in this series.)

Professionals tend to obsess about formal text, such as in reports, and numbers, such as in statistical presentations. These can be powerful, no doubt, but there is growing evidence that most people make sense of the world through stories told and re-told—about why a condition exists in the world, what is problematic (or wonderful) about it, who is responsible, and what should be done. Ideas about these things fit together in narratives that are organized to reflect the culture and traditions of a group—i.e., to reflect the very things that give it identity as a group.

The effort to present information and get meaningful feedback thus becomes a mechanism for learning through stories, not a mechanical exercise of exchanging facts. Stories can be told and challenged, rewritten and updated, drawing on many kinds of insights. Because they are persuasive,



**The effort to present information and get meaningful feedback thus becomes a mechanism for learning through stories, not a mechanical exercise of exchanging facts.**

stories can also manipulate. They can be masterfully constructed to incite particular emotions and beliefs and to favor particular political outcomes.

To cite one example of storytelling at work, in the South Bronx planning effort we looked at earlier, planners and community organizers found that some of the best public discussions with neighborhood residents, merchants, and other stakeholders happened where big stories about the neighbor-

hoods’ past and future could be outlined and “taken apart.” One story was about economic decline from a past that included many high-wage factory jobs located right in the neighborhood. The present and future included a very different story—about service jobs, many of them low-wage and less secure than the unionized factory jobs of bygone days, and many of them (the new jobs) dispersed throughout metropolitan New York City.

Focusing on the many indicators that made up these stories—using formal reports, official data sources, and recollections of community members to do it—didn’t dictate what the stakeholders should want, of course, but helped a diverse array of participants in the community planning process to take stock of the past and deal with the present and future

in an honest, realistic way.

### 4. Deliberating

Next, there’s the *deliberative process* at the heart of effective participation efforts. If organizing and knowledge building include important work “outside the room” to prepare for participation, deliberation focuses on much of the work inside the room to generate better discussion and better, more widely supported decisions. This takes work, and there’s both an art and a science to supporting it—which becomes *everyone’s* responsibility. Michael Doyle describes the promise of deliberation and the power of facilitation as a “constellation of ingredients”:

... a deep belief in the wisdom and creativity of people; a search for synergy and overlapping goals; the ability to listen openly and actively; a working knowledge of group dynamics; a deep belief in the inherent power of groups and teams; a respect for individuals and their points of view; patience and a high tolerance for ambiguity to let a

Figure 5. Promoting Deliberation, from *Facilitator’s Guide to Participatory Decisionmaking* (1996)

Conventional Groups	Participatory Groups
The fastest thinkers and most articulate speakers get more “air time.”	Everyone participates, not just the vocal few.
Differences of opinion are treated as conflict that must either be stifled or “solved.”	Opposing viewpoints are allowed to co-exist.
People with discordant, minority perspectives are commonly discouraged from speaking out.	Even in the face of opposition from the person in charge, people are encouraged to stand up for their beliefs.

decision evolve and gel; strong interpersonal and collaborative problem-solving skills; an understanding of thinking processes ...

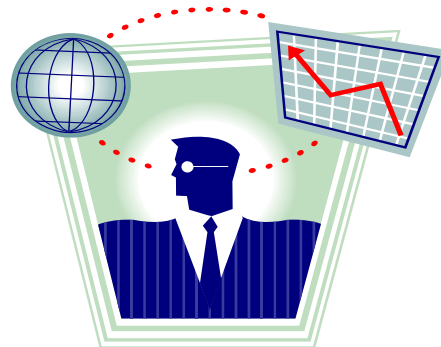
In the same *Facilitator's Guide*, Sam Kaner and his colleagues highlight key differences between "participatory groups" and "conventional groups," among them norms and practices that make room for divergent thinking and that foster respect for difference, regardless of how things get decided (see Figure 5).

A growing array of tools are exploring the uses of information technology to support deliberation, from the electronic town meeting mentioned earlier to "asynchronous" online dialogues (that do not require participants to interact at the same time), deliberative polling (in which random samples of citizens are surveyed before and after a few days of discussion of some controversial public issue), and more.

Think about these for a moment, and you'll notice what is so easily missed about these models: The most important "technology" is the overall design of participation (the why, who, what), which specific *information* technologies are harnessed to support. The machinery alone does not the model make. Misused, information technology gadgets may even distract participants from the core work of deliberating with others—or simply generate larger ritual shows of participation (public performances) that have little real impact on decisions that matter or on

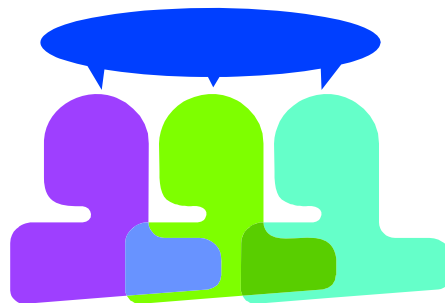
civic capacity needed to build solutions together in a community.

**Harnessing the Power of Diversity.** Culture, personality, and other factors affect many of these attitudes and prac-



**Some people learn from charts and graphs, while others needs stories told. Some welcome emotion in public gatherings as a sign of authentic engagement and appreciation of the stakes, while others fear that passion will overwhelm reasoned debate. Some speak with their bodies—to convey meaning—and some don't.**

tices, of course. They shape how we think, how we communicate, how we listen, and how we learn—or fail to learn—from others and their viewpoints. In other words, they affect our



ability to "do democracy up close" through participatory work.

Some people (and some groups of people) learn from charts and graphs, while others needs stories. Some welcome emotion in public gatherings as a sign of authentic engagement and appreciation of the stakes, while others fear that passion will overwhelm reasoned debate and that strong feelings inevitably lead to finger-pointing and stand-off—a sign that some stakeholders are not truly invested in collective action on the problems at hand. Some people speak with their bodies, using gestures and distinctive body language to convey meaning, and some don't. Some people respond to arguments about deeply held public values, invoking respect, tradition, or the ideal of community itself, while others find these abstract or disregard them as quaintly sentimental—and hope for

a quick return to "just the facts."

What's more, as Kevin Avruch reminds us in *Culture and Conflict Resolution*, *culture* is often not a simple function of *ethnic* or national-origin differences. Education and income differences can be important, and so can professional divides, because professional specialties train us to look at the world and test ideas about it in different ways. As the saying goes, "When you have a hammer, everything looks like a nail."

Addressing the role of culture means more than encouraging a general pattern of tolerance, though in many settings, tolerance can certainly be a positive start. An in-depth discussion of culture and diversity issues could fill volumes (and has), but in the references and resources below, you'll find opportunities to learn more.

Paying attention to diversity and harnessing its value in problem-solving is a practical and political imperative in our communities. It cannot be limited to com-

***The quickest way to miss out on the opportunity to develop a great idea is to never "have" it in the first place ... Both the quantity and quality of ideas generated matter, because quality is partly a function of how many not-so-great ideas you can toss out.***

plying with legal protections against discrimination. It means actively seeking outsider viewpoints, learning how to accommodate different styles of presentation and persuasion, becoming aware of unconscious or unspoken ways in which the rules of the game favor some groups over others, and looking for ways to make planning and decision-making more legitimate to a wider array of social groups.

**Creativity—Having More and Better Ideas.** The quickest way to miss out on the opportunity to develop a great idea is to never “have” it in the first place. Below, I’ve identified a few of the many tools created to help problem-solving groups have more and better ideas—about substantive issues *and* process (“how we work together”). I say “more *and* better” because both quantity and quality matter. Quality is partly a function of how many not-so-great ideas you can toss out.

Architects, product designers, business strategists, software developers, and others have long worked with this premise: Why have just three ideas about something and pick one to develop when we might be able to generate fifteen ideas, explore the best four in a little depth, and then pick and develop further the very best of these? Brainstorming is one well-known tool for group idea having, but there are others.

## 5. Deciding

Not all participation efforts are conscious, let alone creative, about “deciding how to decide.” Whether a participatory process makes it core contributors “final deciders” or “advisers” to other deciders (see above), groups must, at minimum, decide what to recommend to others. Deciding how to decide is perhaps the domain on which we tend to show the *least* creativity, despite how important decision-making is to the fundamental objectives of participatory work. But more and more tools are out there to help us choose routines for shared decision-making that make sense given our particular context and needs. For example, three common decision rules are:

- Simple majority vote (the best known

but also perhaps the most over-used);

- Consensus decision-making; and
- Super-majority vote.

Let’s look briefly at each of these and their strengths and weaknesses.

*Simple Majority Vote* is familiar in many cultures and settings and relies on the premise of majority rule. Participants can gain experience at building coalitions needed to ensure a majority.

**Consensus decision-making overcomes many of the limitations of majority-vote procedures ... But consensus requirements can leave a group hostage to the veto power of an individual or small group that may not be willing or able to accommodate the interests of others.**



But this approach invariably runs the risk that almost half (49%) of the people in the process will be unhappy with the outcome. Decisions may be more quickly arrived at but less sustainable over time and less creative than proposals that would gain wider support.

*Consensus Decision-Making* overcomes many of the limitations of majority-vote procedures and encourages participants to creatively build on each other’s ideas and address a wider array of interests. Consensus-based approaches are deeply rooted in many cultures as well, especially in tribal governance worldwide. As *The Consensus Building Handbook* instructs, the aim of many formal consensus building processes is to generate “livable” proposals, not necessarily proposals that everyone

loves, and participants are usually obliged to voice strong opposition so that consensus does not simply paper over (cover up) conflicts. But consensus requirements can leave a group hostage to the veto power of an individual or small group that may not be willing or able to accommodate the interests of others. That is, consensus procedures may be abused by the minority.

On the other hand, pressure to come to consensus can also discourage the use

ful and legitimate voicing of minority opinions. Social pressure makes us reluctant to stand apart from the crowd. For all these reasons and more, consensus decision-making is a powerful but demanding and, for many of us, an unfamiliar way to do business.

*Super-Majority Vote* represents a common compromise between majority-vote and (full) consensus rules. It can be used to resolve highly contested issues if consensus procedures have fallen short—or conversely, to ensure wider support on high-stakes decisions for which simple-majority voting is deemed insufficient.

*Decision “Prep” Techniques* are not rules (like those above) but offer a way to help groups *transition* from open-ended deliberation to the trickier “decision points.” For example, individuals may agree to assume “devil’s advocate” roles in order to push the group to better uncover assumptions and consider weaknesses or “blind spots” in proposals. Role plays invite responses to an idea from the vantage point of particular stakeholders in a process, and “role switching” can help parties that disagree to more fully appreciate each other’s point of view. These process techniques help groups more fully exploring the pros, cons, and “so what’s” of ideas before they are put

to vote or other tests of support.

Decision prep techniques underline how important it is to think through the processes that lead up to decision-making—knowledge building, broadly defined—and not just decision-making itself.

An important category of participation technology is thus *decision support* technology, and it ranges from low-tech, low-cost images and physical models to computer-intensive community visualization and geographic information system modeling (see links on our website).

An example of the low-cost, low-tech end of the continuum is the Planning for Real visual option card tool used in neighborhoods and villages around the world. It was developed by Tony Gordon of the Neighborhood Initiatives Foundation in England. The tool reduces technical barriers to participation when alternative futures must be simulated in simple ways and then rated by community members.

These tools, whether computer-driven or computer-less, are most developed for use in spatial decision-making, i.e., where

physical design is the focus. (Henry Sanoff describes many in *Community Participation Methods in Design and Planning*.) But simulation and visualization tools can be useful where programs or services are being designed, too. The key idea is to make the likely consequences of a particular decision more real—more immediate and accessible—to stakeholders.

## Final Thoughts

Engaging a wide array of stakeholders in planning and decision-making is often essential to effective community problem-solving. But the real questions are when and why, with whom and in what roles, over what, and how—and sometimes each of these is difficult to answer.

As we've seen, making better decisions about the operational tactics of participatory work (the how) hinges on having an overall strategy that addresses those bigger questions. And while good strategy and tactics do not guarantee results, they make it more likely that planning efforts *will* be sub-

stantively valuable for those who invest time, money, reputation, and other precious resources—and not merely become an exercise in togetherness.

On the next few pages, you'll find resources for doing more learning, not just about planning and participation issues but about a host of related topics in community problem-solving. □

## Further Reading and Other Resources

Here is a list, both general and more specific, for learning more about issues of stakeholder analysis and engagement, group learning and problem-solving, and innovative planning.

Many of these items are available free on-line (not just the ones with web addresses included below). And more items are listed and linked on our website, including recent updates.

### I. Background:

For *context*—strong overviews of the demands for increased participation in decision-making in democratic societies worldwide—see: *Deepening Democracy*, edited by Archon Fung and Erik Olin Wright (New York: Verso, 2003); Berry, Thomson, and Portnoy, *The Rebirth of Urban Democracy* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution, 1993); Bill Potapchuk, *Moving from Collaborative Processes to Collaborative Communities* (Washington, DC: Community Building Institute and National Civic League, 2002); Burki, Perry, and Dillinger, *Beyond the Center: Decentralizing the State* (Washington, DC: World Bank, 1999); Osborne and Plastrik, *Reinventing Government* (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1992).

Also see the Deliberative Democracy Consortium at [www.deliberative-democracy.net](http://www.deliberative-democracy.net).

For *critique* of planning efforts that do not include adequate or meaningful participation, see: Richard S. Bolan, "Community Decision Behavior: The Culture of Planning," *Journal of the American Institute of Planners* 35(5):301-310 (1969); and Sherry R. Arnstein, "A Ladder of Citizen Participation," *Journal of the American Institute of Planners* 35(4):216-224 (1969).

### LEARNING MORE FROM TOOLS IN THIS SERIES

To learn about other topics that relate to effective alliance building, check out these strategy tools in our series, available at [www.community-problem-solving.net](http://www.community-problem-solving.net):

**Perfect Fit or Shotgun Marriage? The Power and Pitfalls in Partnerships.** Many planning efforts point to the need for more joint work on complex problems. The concept of "partnership" as a mechanism for pooling resources to get things done is almost as old as recorded history. Useful partners may bring money, materials, expertise, reputation, relationships, and more to help us achieve things that matter to us—and, ideally, to them as well. Today, the demand for public interest partnerships has increased dramatically. Unfortunately, much available guidance either celebrates more than it clarifies or focuses on just a small part of the landscape. Learn more about the strategies and tactics needed to determine whether partnering is an appropriate strategy and, if so, how to build partnerships that work.

**Learning Together: Building New Knowledge and Better Ideas.** A wide variety of efforts by stakeholders to tackle problems together place high hopes on generating learning through interaction and exploration, e.g. in groups or along networks. But how does such learning actually happen? What are the potential and limits? How can ideas about learning be more effectively harnessed in organizing, planning, and partnering efforts?

**"We are All Negotiators Now": An Introduction to Negotiation for Community Problem-Solvers.** Participatory efforts are run through with negotiations big and small, formal and informal, yet many "community" problem-solvers think of negotiation as a dirty word—the very antithesis of community. Negotiation may conjure up images of hard-nosed horse trading, half-truths, and power games. But as negotiation gurus Roger Fisher and William Ury of the Harvard Program on Negotiation put it, "Everyone negotiates something every day ... It is back-and-forth communication designed to reach an agreement when you and the other side have some interests that are shared and others that are opposed." Learn to build better agreements.

More recent critiques are in Peter Geoffrey Hall's aptly titled *Great Planning Disasters* (London: Weidenfield and Nicolson, 1980); and James C. Scott, *Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed* (New Haven: Yale, 1998).

For case studies and guidelines on structuring participation strategically, see: The World Bank's PovertyNet on-line, especially "Empowerment Tools and Practices" ([www.worldbank.org/poverty/empowerment/toolsprac/](http://www.worldbank.org/poverty/empowerment/toolsprac/)); the report listed above, *Moving from Collaborative Processes to Collaborative Communities*.

## 2. Tools:

For a broad array of tools, see: Community Toolbox (search on-line); the Community Building Institute (Communitytools.net); the National Civic League's guide to community visioning (available at their website); the toolbox of the International Association for Public Participation ([www.iap2.org](http://www.iap2.org)), which includes a great, quick-reference table of techniques (what they are for, what can go wrong); and Henry Sanoff, *Community Participation Methods in Design and Planning* (New York: John Wiley, 2000).

Also see CIVICUS: World Alliance for Citizen Participation ([www.civicus.org](http://www.civicus.org)); Logo Link, a global learning initiative on citizen participation in local governance, at the Institute for Development Studies, University of Sussex ([www.ids.ac.uk/logolink](http://www.ids.ac.uk/logolink)).

For guides to *mapping community assets*, see materials developed by the Asset-Based Community Development Institute, Northwestern University ([www.northwestern.edu/ipr/abcd.html](http://www.northwestern.edu/ipr/abcd.html)).

On *creating deliberative groups*, see *Facilitator's Guide to Participatory Decision-Making*, by Sam Kaner and Associates (Gabriola Island, British Columbia, Canada: New Society, 1996); and Study Circles Resource Center at the website [www.studycircles.org](http://www.studycircles.org).

On the art and science of *creating public gatherings*, see Elaine Cogan, *Successful Public Meetings: A Practical Guide* (Chicago, IL: American Planning Association, 2000); and the International Association's toolbox (see above).

# Got ideas?

Send us your feedback on the content of this tool—or any and all ideas you would like to share on taking action to make a difference in communities:

[feedback@community-problem-solving.net](mailto:feedback@community-problem-solving.net)

On *facilitation skills* more generally, see Roger Schwarz, *The Skilled Facilitator: Practical Wisdom for Developing Effective Groups* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1994); and the *Facilitator's Guide* (above); and many websites listed on our site.

For participation-related tools developed and tested in *government*, see David Osborne and Peter's *Reinventor's Fieldbook: Tools for Transforming Your Government* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2000).

On *building public life skills* among traditionally uninvolved stakeholders or groups, see the grassroots curriculum of the Boston Community Building Network, developed in collaboration with the Interaction Institute for Social Change ([www.interactioninstitute.org/](http://www.interactioninstitute.org/)); plus LogoLink (listed above); The World Bank's Community Empowerment and Social Inclusion website; and training offered by political organizing groups, such as the Industrial Areas Foundation. See the tool in this series, "Organizing Stakeholders and Issues," too.

On *managing social diversity* in planning and organizing efforts, see the "Technology of Participation" concepts and trainings offered by the Institute of Cultural Affairs ([www.ica-usa.org](http://www.ica-usa.org)); Xavier de Souza Briggs, "Doing Democracy Up Close," *Journal of Planning Education and Research* 18:1-13 (1998), available on-line; Study Circles Resource Center's material on diversity; and Michael Burayidi, *Urban Planning in a Multicultural Society* (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1997).

On *developing creativity*, see free "mind tools" ([www.mindtools.com/brainstm.html](http://www.mindtools.com/brainstm.html)); and excellent discussion in James L. Adams, *Conceptual Blockbusting: A Guide to Better Ideas* (Reading, Massachusetts: Addison-Wesley, 1986).

On using *information and communication technology* to support decision-making—for example through visualization and forecasting techniques—see CommunityViz.com. For information on "electronic town meetings" that use handheld polling devices and computer recording of stakeholder input, see AmericaSpeaks.org; and deliberative polling techniques at The Center for Deliberative Polling at the University of Texas, Austin.

More links on this fast-growing area of technology and deliberative planning are at [community-problem-solving.net](http://community-problem-solving.net).

Finally, on *neighborhood planning and design*, with a strong focus on physical design issues, see Bernie Jones, *Neighborhood Planning: A Guide for Citizens and Planners* (Chicago, IL: American Planning Association, 1990); and the Sanoff book listed above.

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