

The background features a light gray, semi-transparent illustration of several hands and interlocking gears. The hands are positioned as if they are holding or adjusting the gears, symbolizing human effort and community engagement. The gears are of various sizes and are arranged in a way that suggests a complex, interconnected system.

# Sustaining Public Engagement

Embedded Deliberation in Local Communities

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An Occasional Research Paper from  
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### Everyday Democracy

Everyday Democracy, a project of The Paul J. Aicher Foundation, helps local communities find ways for all kinds of people to think, talk and work together to solve problems. Using groundbreaking tools and methods for organizing large-scale dialogue and collaborative problem solving, Everyday Democracy works with neighborhoods, cities and towns, regions, and states, helping them pay particular attention to how structural racism and other structural inequalities affect the problems they address.

### Kettering Foundation

The Kettering Foundation is an operating foundation rooted in the tradition of cooperative research. Kettering's primary research question is, what does it take to make democracy work as it should? Established in 1927 by inventor Charles F. Kettering, the foundation is a 501(c)(3) organization that does not make grants but engages in joint research with others.

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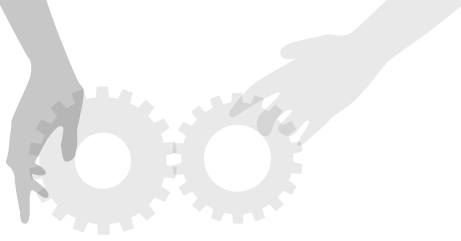


## Introduction

Over the past four years, we have studied local public deliberations in nine communities across the United States. We searched for communities where it seemed that the practice of regular and organized deliberation had taken root and grown. We wanted to understand how what almost always begins as a limited effort to mobilize citizens and convene them to consider a public issue or political problem can sometimes grow into a regular practice that involves many different segments of a community and spans multiple issues that bear scant relation to one another. Such communities, we thought, would be interesting because they would be ones in which the skills, practice, and organizational wherewithal to conduct regular public deliberation had become “embedded.”

### Embedded Deliberation

Embeddedness is a habit of deliberation among citizens. When that habit is embedded in a community's political institutions and social practices, people frequently make public decisions and take collective actions through processes that involve discussion, reasoning, and citizen participation rather than through the exercise of authority, expertise, status, political weight, or other such forms of power.



Consider the progress that has been made in understanding the practice of public deliberation to date:

- First, practitioners of public deliberation, or deliberative democracy, have by now mastered the art of creating high-quality organized deliberations as one-off events that last from a day to several weeks. Though never easy and often expensive, we know how to organize and convene citizen juries, National Issues Forums, 21st-century town meetings, study circles, and deliberative polls.
- Second, networks like the National Issues Forums have created community institutions—such as the Public Policy Institutes—that house, host, and support public deliberations.
- Third, several investigators have looked at the practices and realities of informal public deliberation in communities and community institutions. These remarkable accomplishments in practice and understanding mark real progress in the state of deliberative practice.

Embedded deliberation takes the state of the art one step farther—a community that has embedded deliberation in its practices of public reflection and action:

- utilizes methods of more or less formally organized deliberation
- to consider a range of public issues or problems
- over a period of several years.

As we shall see, it is also often the case that deliberation in these communities is linked to a range of community-based or governmental organizations in ways that affect the decisions, resources, or policies of those bodies.

### **Indicators of Embedded Deliberation**

A community that has embedded deliberation in its practices of public reflection and action (i) utilizes methods of organized—more or less formal—deliberation (ii) to consider a range of public issues or problems (iii) over a period of several years. Often public deliberation is (iv) linked to a range of community-based or governmental organizations in ways that affect the decisions, resources, or policies of those bodies.



*Though they themselves may not recognize it, deliberative practitioners also address more fundamental shortcomings of the structures of local democratic governance through their work.*

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The main sections of this report describe our general investigative process and the results of our analysis. We begin by outlining our methodology and offering capsule descriptions of the nine communities we investigated. These brief accounts highlight the distinctive deliberative accomplishments of each. Together they offer beacons and benchmarks toward which other deliberative practitioners might strive.

The rest of the report grapples with the challenge of understanding—sometimes interpreting—what these communities have accomplished. We start by asking what challenges induced them to adopt deliberative interventions. At the most obvious level, each has used public deliberation to address a concrete local problem or issue. In a notable number of those communities, deliberations address challenges around public education, but problems like urban planning and growth management, racial tension and diversity, domestic abuse, and child welfare also appeared. The understanding of many deliberative practitioners and activists in these communities was that public engagement and deliberation would help solve these problems.

We argue that deliberative projects and reforms in these communities work at a deeper level as well. Though they themselves may not recognize it, deliberative practitioners also address more fundamental shortcomings of the structures of local democratic governance through their work. In the section titled “Making Democracy Work,” we contend that local democratic governance arrangements face certain characteristic problems, or democratic deficits. These deficits may include:

- weak social fabric,
- unstable public judgment,
- gaps in communication and accountability between officials and communities, and
- insufficient governmental resources to tackle a range of social challenges.

The structures of organized public deliberation can help address each of these deficits although different kinds of democratic deficits require different forms of public deliberation and deliberative action. If practitioners recognize this additional dimension of their work—if they come to see

that the deliberative practices they create are repairing democratic governance at the same time that they solve local problems—our hope is that they will tailor their projects in ways that are suited to, and therefore more effective remedies for, the particular deficits they encounter.

We attempt to understand why deliberation in our study communities has successfully spread over time by developing the concept of embedded deliberation. We explain the characteristics of embeddedness and why it is helpful to understand embeddedness on two levels: some practices embed deliberative *reflection* while others also embed deliberative *public action*. The first establishes habits of ongoing deliberation to improve community relations, clarifies the understanding of public policy problems, or provides input to policymakers, while the second translates deliberation into action by mobilizing communities and resources to solve local problems.

The first level of embeddedness is a necessary condition for the second. All of the communities that have embedded public action have also developed habits of public reflection. Some communities do not move from reflection to action because the problems they attempt to solve, from limited social trust to the need for public input, require individual transformation or ad hoc involvement, not a sustained mobilization of citizens.

Drawing upon work with researcher Joseph Goldman, we suggest that three factors in communities favor embedded deliberation:

- **Political authority**

Elected officials must support public deliberation and be willing to consider its results and even share authority with bodies of deliberating citizens.

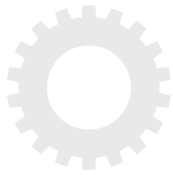
- **Deliberative capacity**

Public or, more often, civic organizations in the community must develop the resources and expertise to convene structured deliberations and to mobilize people to participate in those deliberations.

- **Demand for democracy**

Though rarely evident in our study communities, embeddedness requires a popular constituency that presses for public deliberation when such engagement becomes uncomfortable or inconvenient for local elites and authorities.

The final sections of this report offer some tentative thoughts about benchmarks and measures of deliberative embeddedness and the kinds of civic leadership and strategies that are likely to sustain local deliberative practices.



*We singled out cases where deliberative practices had become fairly widespread and repeated over time and had led to some action around the issues.*

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## Methodology

**T**he objective of these case studies was to learn about the paths and patterns that lead from deliberation to action and about the conditions under which deliberation becomes socially and politically embedded. Therefore, our selection of case studies was highly opportunistic. We singled out cases where deliberative practices had become fairly widespread and repeated over time and had led to some action around the issues. We selected these cases not only to illustrate successful examples of embedded deliberation, but also to explain the breadth of problems that can be addressed through deliberative interventions. Subsequently, we wanted to focus on the reasons that made these interventions successful, including how and why deliberation became embedded, the role of deliberative entrepreneurs, and the strategic choices they faced to promote deliberation. The advice of national experts on community-level deliberations guided us in our process of case identification.

We selected mature or relatively mature cases. Efforts to influence policymaking or mobilize communities are slow processes that require

capacity building, resources, and the creation of strategic alliances. The relative maturity of our cases enables us to observe how deliberative practices evolved through time and to understand their embeddedness and impact over a period of several years.

In each case, we conducted at least one field visit of several days and observed deliberative events. These observations enabled us to better understand different deliberative models, the dynamics among participants, and the mechanisms employed to promote action. In some cases, we attended trainings on the specific deliberative model used, including the National Issues Forums (NIF) model in West Virginia and Hawaii and the Indigenous Issues Forums model in South Dakota.

Our case studies drew upon different deliberative approaches. Many were informed by the study circles model, which combines public deliberation (and dialogue) with community organizing. Participants—often numbering in the hundreds—meet in both large and small gatherings. Most of the deliberations take place in smaller groups of 8 to 12 that meet in a series of sessions to explore an issue with the guidance of peer facilitators. Participants start by discussing an issue, then move on to explore concrete ways



they could address the problem, and come up with specific action ideas.<sup>1</sup>

At NIF forums, a diverse group of participants (the number can vary greatly) may gather for one or more deliberations, often lasting two hours, about a public policy problem, such as reforming health care or U.S. - international relations. A moderator invites participants to weigh different approaches, considering their pros and cons so they can deepen their understanding, appreciate the complexity of an issue, and move in the direction of making a collective decision.

The Community Conversations we observed in Connecticut mobilize a large, diverse group for an evening during which participants discuss public education issues in small groups and formulate concrete action plans.

The Indigenous Issues Forums, employed by Native Americans in South Dakota, are small-group dialogues where participants share personal stories and explore tribal issues. Facilitators invite participants to reflect about the characteristics of a healthy dialogue process.

Finally, the Keiki Caucus (Children Caucus) in

Hawaii, which focuses on issues relating to children, convenes stakeholders, including legislators, advocacy groups, and public agencies. The caucus meets monthly to discuss pressing issues, prioritize needs, and assemble a legislative package.

Most of these deliberative approaches were developed by national organizations. In every case, however, those in local communities adapted the different models to their specific circumstances and needs.

We also conducted extensive interviews with those who could help us understand these cases and illuminate our research questions. In general, we interviewed the main promoters of public deliberation and those who were exposed to deliberation to register their reactions, as well as activists, policymakers, experts, and organizations in which deliberation has been employed as an instrument to advance their objectives. We also examined available primary documents, which ranged from simple lists of objectives recorded during a deliberation to newspaper stories, more formal reports, articles, and publications.



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<sup>1</sup> In this report, the term *study circles* is used in two ways. Sometimes, the term describes the overall structure of a public engagement process, and in other instances, it describes one, or a series of small-group meetings on a public issue that form the centerpiece of the public engagement process. In 2008, the Study Circles Resource Center (SCRC) changed its name to Everyday Democracy to better communicate the nature of its mission—and also to signal its growing understanding that the term *study circles*, by connoting individual small-group meetings, paints an incomplete picture of the organization’s work and that of its community partners. The authors use the old study circles language in this report because the case studies were completed before the SCRC changed its name and its sense of how to describe this work.



## What Does Success Look Like?

We began our study by identifying communities in which efforts to create public deliberation seemed to have taken root and, in one way or another, resulted in some kind of public action. We based preliminary assessments of “success” on the suggestions of staff members at national organizations, such as Everyday Democracy (formerly Study Circles Resource Center) and the Kettering Foundation, and word of mouth in the community of deliberative practitioners. We also looked at the database Everyday Democracy uses to track its work in the communities it assists. From this list, we contacted principals in various communities to verify that substantial and ongoing deliberation did, in fact, occur there.

Ultimately, we went on to conduct detailed

studies of nine communities. Readers should not regard the experiences of these communities as typical. Indeed, we selected them because their experiences seemed in their own ways extraordinary. But neither can we say that we have identified the most successful cases of local deliberation. Our search methods and investigative resources were necessarily limited; there are almost certainly other communities in which public deliberation has been longer lived, more widespread, more inclusive, or more effective. Nevertheless, the experiences of the communities we selected were highly instructive. Each of these communities succeeds deliberatively in its own distinctive way. Between them, we believe, they constitute frontiers of deliberation that offer many lessons for those who seek to spread deliberation and deepen democracy.

The brief community profiles below are intended to convey a sense of what we thought success looked like.

Since 1997, **New Castle County, Delaware**, has hosted widespread community deliberations about race relations, equality of opportunity, diversity, and tolerance. More than 12,000 individuals have participated in this effort, making the New Castle program the largest of its kind in the country, as far as we know. The success of this program lies in its broad inclusivity as well as in its sustained nature. Under the auspices of the YWCA but joined by several dozen local organizations, more than 600 people participated in community-based study circles on race relations in 1997. In 1998, more than 600 people in the Delaware Department of Labor and in local public schools participated in

participated in dozens of circles on issues like quality of life in a growing population, public school finance, drug testing, and comprehensive community planning. As an instance of successful deliberation, Kuna stands out in two respects. First, study circles were convened on a wide array of topics—involving a variety of local public entities, such as the school board, the planning and zoning board, and local emergency-preparedness agencies—over a period of many years. Second, these government entities came to rely on Kuna’s study circles as an important two-way channel of communication and consultation. Residents improved their understanding of the reasons



*The YWCA and other community leaders managed to build a deep and pervasive network for public deliberation about race that spanned the public, private, and nonprofit sectors.*

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deliberations about workplace race relations. Subsequently, many area businesses, public agencies, community organizations, and churches held study circles as well. Thus, the YWCA and other community leaders managed to build a deep and pervasive network for public deliberation about race that spanned the public, private, and nonprofit sectors.

In **Kuna, Idaho**, an organization called Kuna ACT began to convene study circles around local controversies in 1999. Between 1999 and 2003, approximately 400 Kuna residents

for various public policies and local officials gained a better grasp of public priorities and sensitivities.

**Portsmouth, New Hampshire**, is a town of some 20,000 people that lies near the state’s southern border with Maine. Like Kuna, the community has hosted several rounds of study circles on issues like school violence, school districting, and community master planning. Approximately 850 citizens have participated in these circles. While the large majority of the town’s residents are



*Participants in public housing projects formed tenant associations and mobilized to rid their neighborhoods of crime and improve their living conditions.*

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white, and racial divisions are not an issue, those with whom we spoke noted that the community was nevertheless divided—in this case between many new and professional residents on the one hand, and long-time residents who were less well off, on the other. Against this background, one noteworthy accomplishment of the Portsmouth study circles was to confront this class division in the context of school redistricting.

After the Portsmouth school board failed to gain popular acceptance of one redistricting effort, the group sponsored a round of study circles on the issue in 2000. Over 100 residents from different parts of the city met with one another and toured neighborhood schools. They agreed on a set of principles to guide a redistricting plan that both the school board and town residents were willing to accept. Subsequently, large study circles on several other topics were held and an independent organization called Portsmouth Listens was formed to sustain these public deliberations.

With resources and staff support from the United Way of Wyandotte County, **Kansas City, Kansas**, has been home to community problem solving and public deliberation

efforts in its schools and neighborhoods. Beginning in 1999, the United Way and the public school district initiated a study circles project designed to bridge the gap in trust and understanding between schools and parents. Subsequently, study circle techniques spread to community problem solving around issues of public safety and local revitalization of the city's public housing projects. Since 1999, organizers estimate that some 1,600 adults have participated in more than 100 discussion sessions, and more than 1,800 students attended youth circles that explored diversity, tolerance, and responsibility. Some 150 adults have been trained as facilitators. Public deliberations in Kansas City produced mentoring and after-school programs, improved relations between schools and families, and promoted volunteerism. Participants in public housing projects formed tenant associations and mobilized to rid their neighborhoods of crime and improve their living conditions.

In many of our case studies, public dialogues were introduced by deliberative entrepreneurs in the civic sector. In **Montgomery County, Maryland**, however, deliberations started as an initiative of a public institution. In 2003, the Montgomery

County school district launched a study circles program to support dialogue on race in schools and close the academic achievement gap between primarily white students, on the one hand, and minority and economically disadvantaged students, on the other. Organizers viewed study circles as a potentially more appealing and inviting route to educational engagement than traditional parent-teacher organizations. Since 2003, more than 64 circles have been held, engaging over 900 participants, including teachers, school staff members, parents, and students. Some schools held repeated rounds of circles, and in some high schools, students were trained to facilitate student-only deliberations. The circles brought to light prejudice and other challenges that minority students and parents are faced with. Teachers and school administrators gained awareness of racial barriers and learned about ways to create a more inclusive school environment. Actions included hiring special outreach coordinators and encouraging minority students to join more challenging classes. The dialogues also helped build trust among participants, spurred collaboration and volunteering, and boosted the participation of minority parents.

Study circles became increasingly embedded in the school district. Initially begun as a school-sponsored initiative managed by

an independent organization, they later became fully embedded as a school program. The circles' impact on the schools has been so positive that some school district departments organized special circles on race for their employees. This expansion of study circles has altered the ways in which the school system addresses the challenge of its academic achievement gap.

Owing largely to the support of the League of Women Voters and the William Caspar Graustein Memorial Fund, Community Conversations About Education have been held in some 80 communities across the state of **Connecticut**.<sup>2</sup> According to organizers, well over 5,300 people have participated in these public deliberations since 1997. The conversations are particularly well embedded in the city of Bridgeport, which has held over 40 public deliberations thanks to the support of the local Public Education Fund. Residents of Norwalk and Hartford have held six and five conversations respectively.

Conversations in various communities aim to create shared understandings and goals among educators, parents, and other community members around challenges and priorities in public education. Various communities have chosen to focus on issues like school funding, parental involvement,

<sup>2</sup> The Community Conversations are an initiative developed in collaboration with Public Agenda.

Various communities have chosen to focus on issues like school funding, parental involvement, school choice, child care, educational standards, and family learning. Community Conversations structure local deliberation around different approaches to addressing these challenges, to the development of problem-solving strategies, and to the implementation of those strategies. Community Conversations have led to coordinated social action—for example, improving the accessibility of child care, altering the structure of the school day to address student fatigue concerns, and taking steps to reduce substance abuse by students.

Established in the mid 1990s, the West Virginia Center for Civic Life is an important deliberative catalyst for promoting the use of deliberation at the local level. Hosted at the University of Charleston, it has convened dozens of forums and disseminated deliberative practices in a number of key organizations, involving over 2,000 participants. While it is not uncommon for agencies to join broad coalitions that support deliberations, the **West Virginia** experience is distinctive in that two organizations adopted public deliberations as a strategy to further their advocacy missions. The center has worked with organizations that seek to reduce underage drinking and domestic violence, helping them raise awareness and mobilize residents through the use of public forums.

Operating now for more than a decade, the West Virginia Center trains students, faculty, and staff at the university in deliberative

practices. The center developed forums on important local and regional issues, such as the relationship between citizens and their public schools and the challenges facing low-income families in the state. Though the direct policy effects of these public deliberations are not as clear as in Kuna or Portsmouth, the center has developed good relationships with state legislators in order to convey and make accessible the results of deliberation.

In **South Dakota** we examined two institutions that promote public deliberation. The South Dakota Issues Forums convene forums using the NIF approach. The Indigenous Issues Forums developed an original model that draws from both indigenous traditions of deliberation in the Native American population and the National Issues Forums, in order to create a safe space to talk about challenging tribal issues. With an average of 25 events a year, the Indigenous Issues Forums have involved approximately 800 participants. Participants are encouraged to listen with respect and to suspend their cultural and personal assumptions. By focusing on the procedural aspects of dialogue, participants are expected to gradually improve their ability to communicate, their self-understanding, and their knowledge of their communities. Organizers of these forums aim to improve interpersonal relations and restore the social fabric of Native American communities.

The Public Policy Forums based at the University of **Hawaii** are distinctive in



*The Keiki Caucus has created a distinctive forum for deliberative problem solving around social policy and program implementation that is directly and reliably linked to the state's legislative apparatus.*

sitting state legislator, State Senator Les Ihara, who has led several initiatives designed to make policymaking more deliberative. In partnership with the Public Policy Forums, he helped convene forums that were coordinated with legislative activities. These public policy forums are distinctive in that one of the main supporters of public deliberation is a sitting state legislator.

The Keiki Caucus at the Hawaii state legislature focuses on issues related to children and youth and offers a quite different example of deliberation—this time as a collaborative governance tool. Launched by two legislators, the Keiki Caucus brings together policymakers, public agencies, service providers, NGOs, and other groups active in this area to exchange information

and draft annual legislative packages containing bills aimed at improving child welfare. Over 400 participants have been involved in the Keiki Caucus thus far. The caucus has been a fully embedded practice for over 15 years and legislators endorse most of the bills emerging from it because of the legitimacy and reputation of the process. The Keiki Caucus has created a distinctive forum for deliberative problem solving around social policy and program implementation that is directly and reliably linked to the state's legislative apparatus. The caucus is unlike other instances of deliberation in our study in that its participants are not drawn from the public at large. They are instead an array of stakeholders: professional policymakers, social service workers, and advocates for children's interests.



## Solving Local Problems

In these case studies, community leaders, civic activists, and policymakers were drawn to public deliberation first and foremost because it was a promising means of addressing public problems in their communities. Communities turned to deliberative strategies of public engagement in the hope of mobilizing citizens to address some pressing tangible challenge like failing schools or a longstanding social problem like racial inequality. In some cases, policymakers turned to deliberation when faced with logjams on specific policy choices.

In the 1990s, for example, a significant communication gap caused a great deal of finger-pointing between schools and families in Connecticut. Educators believed schools had improved over time. Many parents,

however, thought that school quality had declined. Some groups, especially African Americans and Hispanics, faced substantial achievement deficits. A local foundation decided to invest in an initiative called “Community Conversations” to fill this communication gap by engaging parents in dialogue with school administrators and teachers.

Kansas City faced a similar challenge. There, many parents, especially those in the African American population, thought their children were ill-served by the public schools and distrusted school staff and administrators. Many neighborhoods in the city were afflicted with decay, rampant crime, poverty, and a pervasive sense of disenfranchisement. A coalition of schools and NGOs began looking for ways to restore trust between residents and schools. They chose the study circles model and held dozens of deliberations that resulted in increased mentoring and

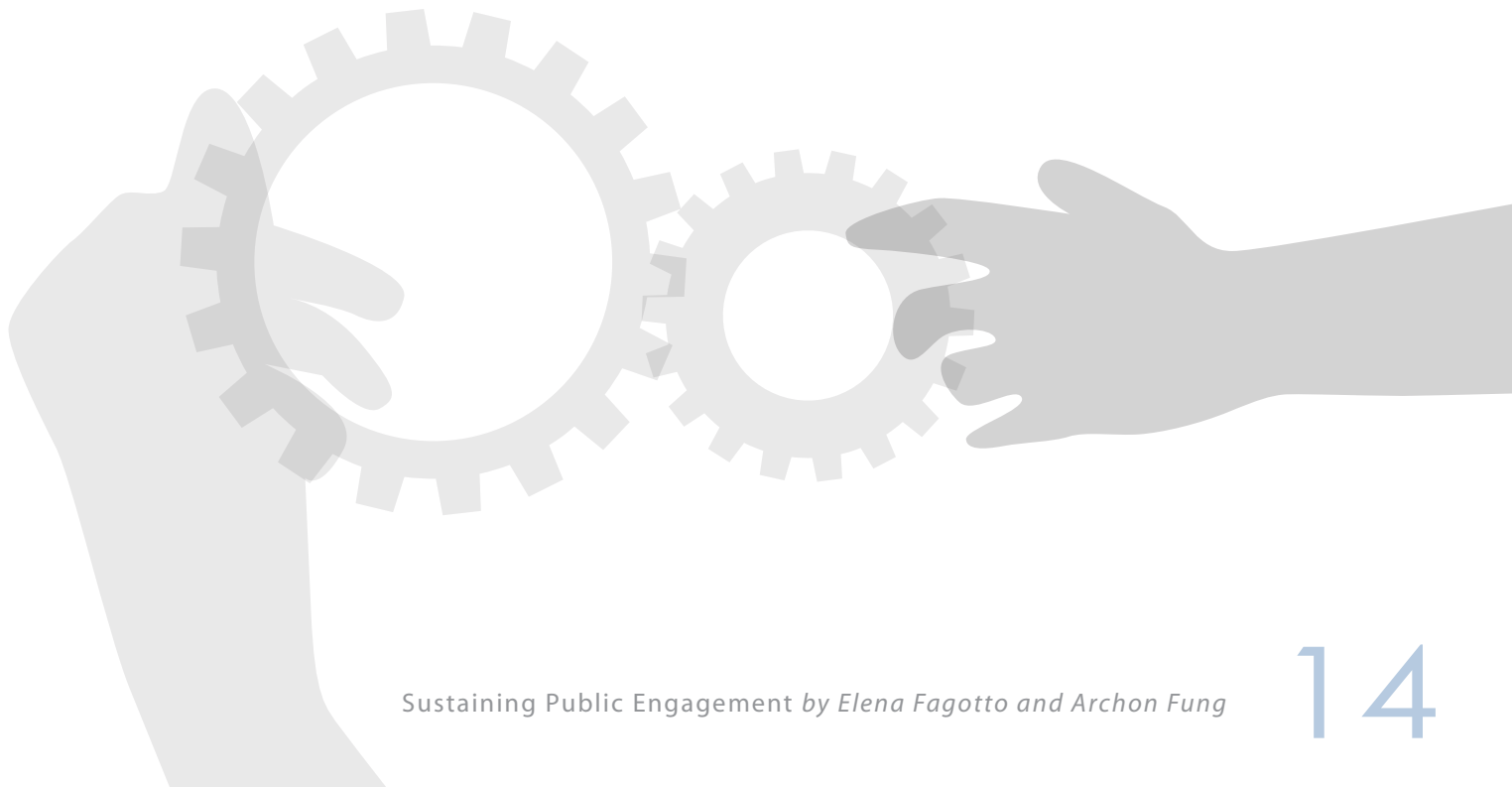


volunteering in schools, programs to reduce crime and clean up neighborhoods, and the formation of active tenant associations.

While crises often motivate civic engagement, the New Castle County study circles were not driven by a specific galvanizing event. The relevant problem there was a persistent lack of opportunity for African American and Latino residents. Race and ethnicity represented a substantial barrier to higher paying jobs, educational opportunities, and home ownership. This was especially true in Wilmington, a city with a predominantly African American population (57 percent) located in a county in which only 20 percent of residents are African American. A coalition led by the local YWCA wanted to give residents an opportunity to become actively engaged in discussing these issues. The study circles model, with its blend of deliberation and action, enabled participants to raise their own awareness of racial issues and encouraged them to change their own behaviors in collaboration with others.

In Kuna, community conflict catalyzed public deliberation. The school board was handed a stinging—and to them, surprising—defeat in a ballot proposal to fund new school construction. At a later time, parents and students were divided over a drug-testing policy. In the face of these social conflicts, policymakers turned to public deliberations, in the form of study circles, to give residents a venue to reflect on the issues and to offer policy guidance to the school board.

In Portsmouth, city officials used study circles to obtain citizen input on issues, such as a school redistricting plan, which faced strong opposition from parents. Parents met in deliberations that crossed class and neighborhood lines. Exposure to a variety of perspectives helped defuse opposition to the redistricting plan. In these cases, deliberative procedures reduced social conflict by giving residents opportunities to inform themselves and provide input to policymakers.





## Making Democracy Work

**T**he previous section described these cases of public deliberation as solving various kinds of community problems. At a more fundamental level, however, the most successful of these efforts also improve the quality of local democratic governance by repairing certain persistent problems in the ways that local decisions are made and public actions taken. Thus, those who build institutions and practices of public engagement frequently work at two levels. Not only do they address urgently felt needs in their communities but, although they may not have intended it, they also improve the machinery of democratic self-government.

Democracy is a broad and elusive ideal, but it is also a concrete set of practices and institutions. When we say that democracy isn't working well, we mean the institutions and practices through which we make collective decisions and take public action have specific defects. To enumerate and understand the most important of these deficits, we draw a highly simplified picture of the representative process of policymaking as it is taught in secondary school civics classes across the country (see Figure 1).<sup>3</sup>

Our institutions of political representation create a chain that connects the interests of citizens to elected legislators to administrative agencies and public policies that, ideally, advance the interests of citizens. Briefly, citizens have fundamental interests such as security, welfare, and liberty (1). They

<sup>3</sup> Archon Fung, "Democratizing the Policy Process," in *The Oxford Handbook of Public Policy*, eds. M. Moran, M. Rein, and R. Goodin (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2006).

Figure 1: The Representative Policy Process



form political preferences—about positions, policies, parties, or candidates—that will protect their fundamental interests (2). Based on these preferences, citizens express their political choices through voting (3) and those votes produce mandates for politicians or parties (4). Using the authority provided by those mandates, representatives devise laws and policies (5) that are implemented by public agencies (6). Ideally, laws and agency actions produce outcomes that advance citizens’ interests (7).

In reality, however, the links in this chain often break in predictable ways. Sometimes, for example, citizens have little or no understanding of policies. They may fail to articulate their interests to politicians or

choose candidates with programs that will not serve them well. Well-meaning politicians may lose touch with the citizens they serve, lose their trust, or fail to grasp their views on important issues. Sometimes, politicians use their position to serve their own ends rather than to serve the public good. Finally, public agencies may lack the wherewithal to produce complex public goods and services, such as effective schools and safe neighborhoods.

The deliberative practitioners in our cases usually set out to solve local problems but in so doing, they also repair these breaks in the chain of democratic governance by complementing representation with deliberation and direct citizen participation.



## Democratic Deficits

Consider now how these breaks in the chain were specifically addressed in our cases. One important lesson that emerges from this analysis is that different challenges—different democratic deficits—call for very different forms of deliberative intervention and citizen participation in order to be effective.

### **Democratic Deficit #1:** **Weak Social Fabric**

When trust among citizens and between citizens and government is low, citizens feel disenfranchised and fail to engage in public life. Although a weak social fabric is not strictly a deficit in the representative policymaking chain (illustrated in Figure 1), democratic governance functions more effectively when citizens are reflective and possess a high level of mutual understanding. Hence efforts to

strengthen the social fabric of communities through public dialogue build an important precondition for a healthy democracy.

Through public dialogues, residents can gain awareness of specific issues, change their individual behaviors, build trust among one another, and restore positive social interactions. By listening and sharing personal stories, individuals have an opportunity to question their beliefs and perhaps modify some of them.

Deliberative activists in two of our case studies focused on the health of relationships between individuals in their communities. The New Castle County study circles on race relations and the Indigenous Issues Forums in South Dakota were introduced (1) to address poor awareness of race relations and tribal issues and (2) to strengthen individual capacities to engage in dialogue and to collaborate with one another.

The Indigenous Issues Forums have reached numerous organizations and individuals, hoping to start a slow transformative process that enables indigenous peoples to understand themselves, their history, and each other in ways that generate the self-confidence and self-respect necessary for democratic engagement. New Castle County's study circles on race have reached thousands of participants and involved more than 140 organizations, many of which have held dialogues with their employees. Although it is too early to tell whether these initiatives transformed individual behavior and restored the social fabric in their respective communities, data for New Castle County show that participants became more aware of prejudice and increased their ability to communicate with others.

These deliberative projects were not designed to inform participants' political preferences, much less to influence the course of public policy or governmental action. Rather, they encouraged individuals to reflect more deeply about their situations in relation to others through dialogue. By transcending mistrust and misunderstanding, these initiatives aim to strengthen the social fabric that binds communities together. Transforming individuals and restoring social fabric in this way might be described as creating a form of "stored action" that may enable civic engagement and collective action in the future.

In one sense, these cases do not appear to have very lofty goals. Participants do

not seek to bend the ear of politicians or other policymakers. They do not set out to forge durable links to legislators or bureaucrats. But, in another sense, these efforts are more ambitious than those of other policy-focused cases in our study. In order to be successful, efforts to build healthy relationships across group boundaries and deepen self-understanding of individuals in a community must reach a substantial fraction of the population they seek to affect. The majority of people in a community need not participate directly in deliberative forums, but the deliberative "treatment" must touch, at least indirectly, a large number of people.

Deliberative initiatives—whether they follow (or modify) the methods of Everyday Democracy, National Issues Forums, *AmericaSpeaks*, or some other approach—generally touch only a very small fraction of a given community. Because they must affect so many, deliberative initiatives that aim at community change through personal transformation must hold many forums over extended periods of time. With some 12,000 participants, the New Castle County study circles involved about 1.4 percent of the population in Delaware. We were unable to establish the proportion of the relevant populations touched by the Indigenous Issues Forums and we do not know the extent to which participants in these initiatives altered their perspectives or behavior as a result of engaging in these deliberations.

In the rich ecology of organizations that promote public deliberation, some consider

public deliberation as an instrument to mobilize groups for social change, so they accompany participants all the way from deliberating to organizing and taking action. Others choose to limit their efforts to specific steps in the continuum. Sometimes, the activists and institutions that promote these kinds of deliberations see their work as a necessary step that lays the groundwork for more sustained civic engagement, but they do not aim to translate deliberations into public action or policy change. In this view, too strong a focus on action would dilute their efforts to improve the quality of human interactions and create the conditions for healthier communities. They may also choose to limit the scope of their activities to the restoration of the social fabric with the understanding that there are other institutions out there that can move groups to the next steps.

## **Democratic Deficit #2: Unstable Public Judgment**

Citizens often make poor judgments about public issues because they lack information, or have not taken the pains to face the trade-offs that sound judgment requires. This contributes to making poor choices at the ballot box and, ultimately, inadequate public policies. To correct this deficit, citizens need to acquire additional information and test their views against those of others. Public

deliberation provides the opportunity to remedy this deficit and improve public judgment through collective reflection.

Much of the work on deliberative practice aims to address the problem of unstable public judgment. Daniel Yankelovich described the problem, and solutions to it, in books such as *Coming to Public Judgment* and *The Magic of Dialogue*.<sup>4</sup> Before and after him, researchers and other political observers have documented the low levels of political knowledge among the general public.<sup>5</sup>

Deliberative methods, such as those employed by the National Issues Forums, intervene in this problem area. They gather a diverse group in a structured deliberation on a public policy issue designed to help participants develop a more complete understanding of problems. Participants also learn to appreciate the reasons given to support views they would normally oppose and become more open to deliberative exchanges.

In our case studies, we have observed this type of deliberative intervention in communities in West Virginia, Hawaii, and South Dakota. Participants in those communities discussed a variety of topics, from health-care reform to immigration and public education. The West Virginia Center for Civic Life was particularly successful at involving large numbers of people in the

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<sup>4</sup> Daniel Yankelovich, *Coming to Public Judgment* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1991) and *The Magic of Dialogue* (New York, NY: Simon & Schuster, 1999).

<sup>5</sup> See Benjamin Page and Robert Shapiro, *The Rational Public: Fifty Years of Trends in Americans' Policy Preferences* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992).



*Whether or not they ultimately have an impact on policy, all public deliberations are designed to improve the quality of judgment of those who participate by providing them with additional information and exposing them to the opinions of other citizens.*

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deliberations. In Hawaii, a state legislator helped convene forums to defuse polarization on issues like gambling and euthanasia. Both were controversial topics in the state legislature, so involving both legislators and stakeholders in deliberations resulted in a more balanced articulation of views.

Study circles and Community Conversations also invite participants to consider competing options to deepen their understanding of policy issues. Whether or not they ultimately have an impact on policy, all public deliberations are designed to improve the quality of judgment of those who participate by providing them with additional information and exposing them to the opinions of other citizens.

### **Democratic Deficit #3: Gaps in Communication and Accountability between Officials and Communities**

In the standard civic model of representative democracy, elections and campaigns provide a central channel through which politicians learn about the views and priorities of their constituents. The need to compete in elections creates incentives for politicians to hear from their constituents through public meetings, social events, focus groups, and

polls. Despite these mechanisms, gaps of trust and mutual knowledge often separate policymakers from citizens. Those gaps can occur if politicians hear only from some citizens and not from others or because new issues arise for which existing processes do not generate clear preferences.

In a noxious form of this democratic deficit, politicians and policy professionals may choose to pursue their own agendas with little regard for public interests and priorities—and apparently without fear of being checked by devices of public accountability. Deliberative initiatives can improve the machinery of democratic governance by broadening the channels of communication between politicians and the public and empowering citizens to hold their representatives accountable.

In Kuna and Portsmouth, local government officials supported study circles because they faced contentious issues, and did not clearly understand what the public's views were on these topics. So they sought the public's input through deliberation. When community members in Kuna divided over a proposal to issue a school bond and on a drug-testing policy, deliberations helped articulate public preferences and provided input to decision

makers. In Portsmouth, study circles were convened to clarify citizens' opinions on a controversial school redistricting plan and on the city's master plan. This two-track policy process—combining traditional chains of representation and policymaking with deliberative mechanisms to gather public input—proved effective in both communities. Policymakers have returned to it on various occasions where the traditional process has proved inadequate.

The Keiki Caucus in Hawaii was formed by two state legislators to gather input from stakeholders in order to draft more effective child-welfare legislation. In that sense, it filled a gap in policymakers' knowledge but it also strengthened the relationship between legislators and stakeholders and increased scrutiny on legislators' decisions. The mechanisms of dialogue and information sharing also served to increase accountability, both for policymakers and for the different public and private agencies represented in the group.

The deliberative initiatives in Kuna and Portsmouth share several characteristics. First, local policymakers in both places supported and participated in a series of public deliberations. Whereas many deliberative initiatives focus on citizens and perhaps on civic organizations, these initiatives worked because they engaged the relevant officials from planning agencies, school boards, and city hall. Repairing deficits caused by a limited understanding of constituents' preferences requires building

bridges between citizens and government. If government is not involved, the bridge leads nowhere.

Second, deliberative activists in both Kuna and Portsmouth convened highly effective deliberations using variants of the study circles model. These deliberations included broadly representative sectors of their respective communities and they were well attended, well facilitated, and informative for participants. Finally, success was made possible because the deliberations were sponsored by capable community-based organizations—Kuna ACT and Portsmouth Listens—that had the know-how and resources to organize effective events. Importantly, these organizations did not limit their efforts to one topic or controversy. Rather, they had the wherewithal to sponsor several different rounds of public deliberation as important problems and issues arose over the years.

Kuna and Portsmouth are impressive in this regard. Few small community organizations manage to catalyze sustained public deliberation in this way. But these efforts are also notable for what Kuna ACT and Portsmouth Listens did *not* have to do. First, they did *not* have to alter the perspectives and behavior of a substantial portion of their communities. In the discussion above, we noted that the goal of repairing social fabric aims at community transformation and thus requires the involvement of a considerable number of citizens. Bridging gaps between communities and government, on the other



hand, can be achieved with greater economy of participation.

It can be enough, for example, that a representative group of citizens deliberate with officials if those officials listen well. If the problem is that policies fail to address citizens' needs, this limited deliberation can remedy the situation. If the problem is public distrust of politicians, the fact that politicians actually listened, if widely known, can increase trust even among those who did not participate directly in deliberative exercises.

Second, these deliberations did not require the same individuals to participate over and over again. That is, they would have done their job well if one set of residents had participated in deliberations around school financing, while an entirely different group convened to discuss sustainable growth management priorities. The deficit of poor communication between government and citizens can be remedied with an economy of civic engagement that does not require particular citizens (except perhaps those who staff organizations like Kuna ACT and Portsmouth Listens) to devote themselves intensively to ongoing deliberations. It doesn't require all the citizens to deliberate all of the time, or even some citizens to deliberate most of the time. It simply requires that some citizens engage in public deliberation some of the time.

The democratic deficit discussed in the next section does, however require more intensive and sustained participation.

## **Democratic Deficit #4: Insufficient Governmental Resources to Tackle a Range of Social Challenges**

Traditionally, public agencies are responsible for providing public goods and services, from functioning schools and public transportation to safe neighborhoods. Some services, however, cannot be effectively delivered without active engagement from the community. Strengthening local schools and making neighborhoods more secure, for example, often demand not only sound public policy, but also support from community members. Only residents have the knowledge to identify areas of need and suggest sustainable projects they would be willing to work on.

Through public deliberation, residents can discuss problems in their area, identify solutions, mobilize for local problem solving, and strengthen their relationships with public officials. A significant portion of the deliberation is devoted to formulating action steps and assigning responsibilities for follow-up so that participants will stay engaged after the deliberations are concluded. This type of deliberation, of course, requires more sustained, frequent, and iterative participation. And clearly, it can be successful only if local government or other institutions take engagement seriously and are willing to collaborate with, or even delegate power to, organized citizens.

Our case studies offer several examples of successful deliberative interventions of this

sort. Communities in Connecticut, Kansas City, and Montgomery County were struggling with problems that could not be solved by policymakers and bureaucrats alone. In the 1990s, Kansas City's superintendent of schools embarked on a bold school reform

gaps between schools and families. In many areas across the state, school authorities participated in productive conversations with parents and other residents. They learned about areas of need they had previously overlooked, and adopted new strategies to



*Mentoring programs and numerous volunteer campaigns to support schools and communities grew out of these deliberations.*

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effort. One of the strategies in his plan was to strengthen communities so they could support schools. Together with the local United Way chapter, he formed a coalition to restore trust between families and schools and to empower disenfranchised communities.

The Kansas City group adopted study circles to engage residents of public housing complexes in deliberations that led to strategies that reduced crime and improved their neighborhoods. Other study circles successfully connected schools in need of resources with churches and community members willing to help. These deliberations involved approximately 2,000 people, including hundreds of young people. Mentoring programs and numerous volunteer campaigns to support schools and communities grew out of these deliberations.

In Connecticut, a charitable foundation sponsored dialogues designed to bridge

improve their services. For many, especially socially isolated minorities, it was the first time they could voice their concerns to public authorities. Organizers estimate that the program reached well over 5,000 people in the state.

The Montgomery County school district realized that providing more resources to students and teachers was not enough to close the achievement gap: families and other parts of the community also needed to be involved. Study circles were adopted to open discussions of race relations and to facilitate collaborative efforts involving families, students, and school staffs to help all students achieve. The circles successfully involved about 900 people and are now spreading to reach all the schools in the district. Deliberations have created a safe space to bring up challenging issues and built trust among families and schools. As a result, parents have become more involved in school

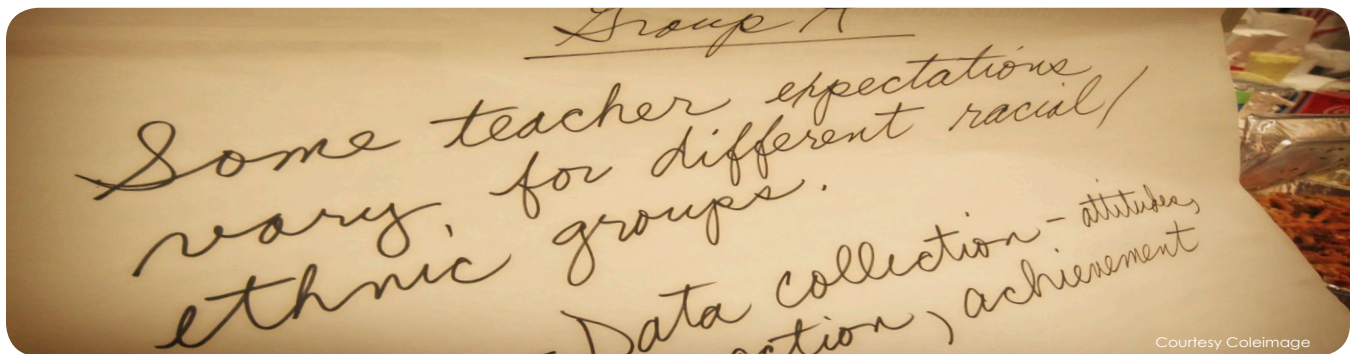
life and new initiatives have been introduced to meet the specific needs of minority students and their families.

Deliberative initiatives that succeed in shoring up insufficient capacity must mobilize citizens to contribute their labor, ideas, and material resources to solving public problems. The structure and demands of these initiatives are, therefore, quite different from those that address problems of unstable public judgment or the gap between citizens and government. In particular, these initiatives required a substantial number of citizens to invest themselves in problem-solving deliberations over substantial periods of time—months and even years. Deliberative

initiatives that mobilize civic resources this way are more akin to community-organizing efforts than to the familiar “public forum” image that is commonly used to describe deliberative practices.

In the sections above, we have characterized what public deliberation at its best can achieve. It contributes to the solution of tangible local problems and, at the same time, helps to mend certain deficits in the democratic process of representative government. These achievements, however, can be short-lived and easily reversed. Thus we turn now to an examination of the conditions that sustain deliberation over time.





## The Concept of Embeddedness

**A** central hypothesis of this research is that deliberation's impact will be sustained in a community only when deliberative practices become embedded in its institutions, organizations, and social practices. When members of a community repeatedly utilize deliberative methods to address community problems, we say that community has embedded deliberation. Embeddedness is a habit of deliberation among citizens. It requires an infrastructure of civic organizations and local government institutions prepared to act on public input and to collaborate with residents. Deliberative events can engage residents in solving local problems even without embeddedness, but unless competent institutions are ready to *listen* and *act* on the public's suggestions, deliberations are likely to have only a modest impact.

The concept of embeddedness highlights how, in most places most of the time, self-conscious and organized public deliberation is a novel act. That is, processes of problem solving, decision making, and public action frequently occur without substantial deliberative engagement from citizens. Instead, professional politicians and organized interest groups jockey for position in shaping policies that favor their constituents by bringing to bear money, authority, or adversarial mobilization. Policy implementation occurs through the offices of professional public servants.

By way of contrast, when deliberation is embedded, political institutions and social organizations systematically include public deliberation in their repertoires of decision making and action. Embedding deliberation alters the decision-making processes of public institutions and other organizations in ways that make them adept at convening public deliberations and acting on their input. When they embed public deliberation,

policymakers improve the formulation of policies and the delivery of public services. When a community embeds deliberation, it strengthens its social fabric by creating a citizenry that is open to dialogue and collaboration, improves the public judgment of its citizens, and makes them more reflective public actors. Finally, embedding deliberation may contribute to solving systemic deficits of democratic institutions.

### **Embedded Public Reflection**

When a community uses deliberation with some regularity to address problems of weak social fabric, to transform individuals, or to inform public judgment, we say they have embedded public reflection. Often, small organizations play an important role in this type of embeddedness by convening forums and training facilitators.

The deliberative entrepreneurs in our case studies have embedded public reflection primarily by creating or transforming independent, nonprofit organizations whose mission is to organize deliberative forums and mobilize community residents to participate. Organizational capacity thus seems to be an essential element for embedding public reflection. In many cases, deliberative entrepreneurs coopted existing organizations to adopt public deliberation as part of their mainline activities. For example, Betty Knighton in West Virginia established the Center for Civic Life at the University of Charleston; the YWCA catalyzes the discussions on race in the Delaware study circles; and National Issues Forums are housed at the University of Hawaii. The Indigenous Issues Forums in South Dakota, on the other

hand, are an independent initiative anxious to preserve their autonomy and, although they cultivate relations with many local organizations, they are not formally housed in any of them.

### **Embedded Reflection, Embedded Action**

#### ***Embedded Public Reflection***

When a community uses deliberation with some regularity to address problems of weak social fabric, to transform individuals, or to inform public judgment, we say they have embedded public reflection.

#### ***Embedded Public Action***

When a community translates public reflection into action to provide public input, to mobilize communities and resources to solve local problems, or to achieve collaborative governance, we say they have embedded public action. For deliberation to be embedded in public action and to improve the character and consequences of that action, deliberative initiatives must be intimately connected to institutions and organizations that possess the resources and authority to address the social problems at issue.

In both the cooptive and the independent approaches, the organizations that facilitate public deliberation did not have specific issue orientations. They were more civic than activist. While it would be premature to say that these are necessary features of organizations that embed public reflection, there are reasons to think that both characteristics are important. Issue neutrality may be important because the topics that merit broad deliberation in any community

of local public action. For deliberation to be embedded in public action and improve the character and consequences of that action, it must be intimately connected to institutions and organizations that possess the resources and authority to address the problems at issue. We therefore suggest that deliberations that provide public input to policymakers, local problem solving, or collaborative governance are more likely to be successful when deliberative practices



*There is no doubt that embedding deliberation comes at a cost for public institutions and other organizations.*

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will vary over time.<sup>6</sup> Advocacy and activist organizations by their nature have particular substantive positions on issues, whereas the point of public deliberation is to develop such positions through natural discovery and reasoning.

### **Embedded Public Action**

While subjects in all of our cases tried to improve public reflection, some also tried to enhance the quality of public action. When public deliberation is connected to policymaking, policy implementation, or other collective action in a sustained way, we say that it is embedded in the routines

become embedded into the procedures and practices of these organizations.

Deliberations designed to provide public input to policymakers are significantly more effective if embedded. There is no doubt that embedding deliberation comes at a cost for public institutions and other organizations: they need to dedicate time and resources to the planning process, undergo training, and overcome internal resistance. They may also need to alter some of their decision-making processes—for example, by formally creating mandates for public input and by involving other organizational layers in the deliberations to ensure that the public input

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<sup>6</sup> Issue neutrality is not, however, exclusive to public reflection. Kuna ACT and Portsmouth Listens, whose focus is embedded public action, are independent organizations that, thanks to their neutrality, were called upon to convene public deliberations on a variety of issues.

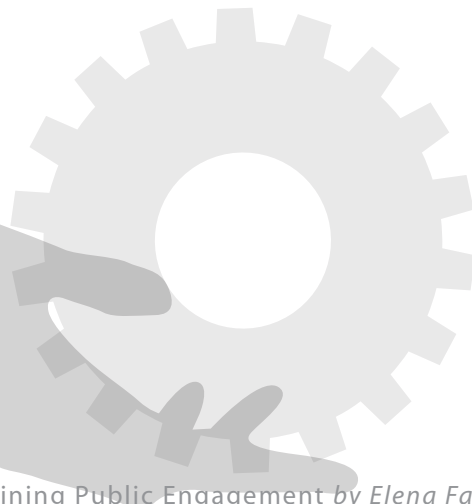
not be disregarded by other departments. For organizations that invest in deliberation, acting on the public's input is simply a way to maximize their return. By listening to citizens and working collaboratively with them, institutions reap the full benefits of embedding deliberation.

Effective local problem solving requires that local institutions sponsor and endorse multiple and frequent deliberative events that include both citizens who are affected by a given problem and officials who are related to it in their professional capacities. It is very likely that problem-solving deliberations will call upon local government or other organizations to perform actions or alter their practices. Embedded deliberative action occurs when those local institutions alter their decision-making procedures and priorities to facilitate ongoing public deliberation and incorporate its results.

Collaborative governance involves the joint determination of broad policies and public actions through the deliberation of citizens or their representatives. Operationally, collaborative governance differs from local

problem solving in two main respects. First, effective collaborative governance may require less frequent deliberation than local problem solving. Collaborative governance often aims to establish framework decisions—for example school attendance boundaries, urban plans, and city budgets—that are less frequently revisited and updated than the more continuous stream of decisions and actions that often characterize community problem solving.

Second, decisions involved in collaborative governance (as the term is used here) usually involve higher levels of decision making and authority: school board members and superintendents rather than teachers and principals, mayors and city councilors rather than police officers and other “street-level” bureaucrats. Because deliberations are less frequent, and participants often less numerous, the burden on sponsoring organizations may be lighter. However, collaborative governance almost always requires elected or appointed decision makers to share their authority with others who join the deliberations.





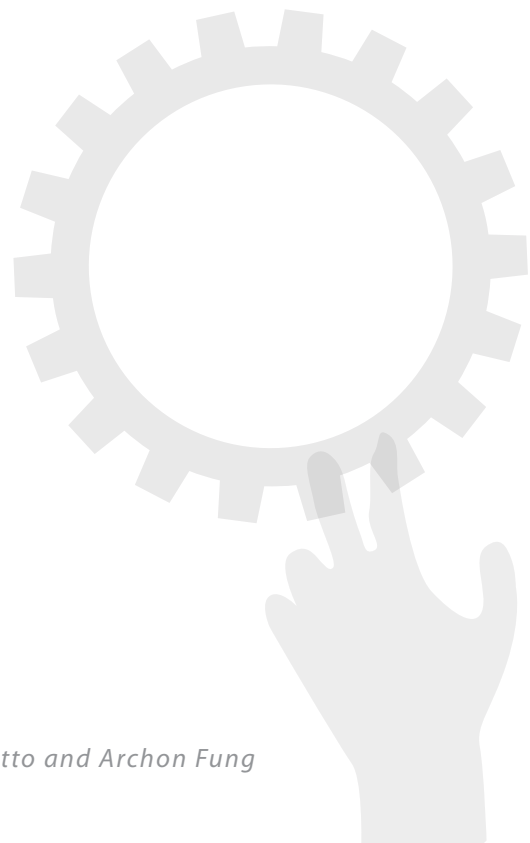
*Because collaborative governance involves an explicit sharing of authority, it is typically more difficult to achieve than other forms of deliberation.*

At its lowest level, collaborative governance requires officials to take public deliberation seriously as an input into their decisions. At a higher level, as in Hawaii's Keiki Caucus, collaborative governance produces policies and public actions that are jointly forged. Because collaborative governance involves an explicit sharing of authority, it is typically more difficult to achieve than other forms of deliberation.

Collaborative governance can occur fitfully without being embedded in these ways. For example, upon hearing that the city's planning committee is considering some new developments in their area, worried neighbors organize a public deliberation to gather the residents' input. The neighborhood may hold a forum and present its findings, but unless the planners are ready to listen, residents' recommendations may go unheeded, which could further exacerbate relations. If, on the other hand, the planning committee embeds deliberation, it will design the forum together with the neighborhood group and set up mechanisms to work with the residents and incorporate their input.

Although it is the product of embeddedness, collaborative governance may also be enhanced by embeddedness. For example, an institution may delegate some of its prerogatives to the public, but if other relevant functions are still carried out in

nondeliberative ways, that may limit the impact of collaborative governance. Similarly, offices that occupy a high position in an institution's hierarchical ladder may quash collaborative governance initiatives coming from lower levels. The Keiki Caucus in Hawaii is a good example of deliberative practices that are well embedded in the legislative process. Even if a limited number of legislators participate in the meetings, the legislative package developed by the caucus is broadly endorsed by a large number of policymakers because of the legitimacy this deliberative practice has earned over the years. Disseminating deliberation within an institution can deepen embeddedness and help reap the full benefits of collaborative governance.







## Three Conditions of Embeddedness

**W**ith this definition of embeddedness and the distinction between deliberative reflection and deliberative action in hand, consider now what conditions are necessary for deliberation to become embedded. Three factors seem to be important <sup>7</sup>:

- political authority
- deliberative capacity
- demand for democracy

### Political Authority

As we have seen, instances of public deliberation are frequently born from the

initiative and energies of civic organizations and entrepreneurs. To endure through time, however, they must also be supported by local politicians and decision makers or, at least, they must find an environment in which political leadership is not hostile. Without official leadership that is willing to engage citizens, and at times delegate some of its authority, deliberation lacks authority and force.

Though officials can often be expected to resist deliberative initiatives, endorsement from a handful of leaders can lay the groundwork for deliberative embeddedness. In Hawaii, for example, Senator Les Ihara promoted National Issues Forums and other deliberative initiatives with legislators, and the Keiki Caucus is chaired by two legislators. The Kansas City study circles were launched by a coalition led by the school superintendent

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<sup>7</sup> Joseph Goldman suggested this framework at a research meeting at the Kettering Foundation in Dayton, Ohio, on May 24-25, 2007.



*In certain cases, leaders have a particular predisposition for collegiality and power sharing, but in others they seem to be motivated by more pragmatic considerations to endorse public deliberation.*

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and the local United Way.

It may well be that in certain cases, leaders have a particular predisposition for collegiality and power sharing, but in others they seem to be motivated by more pragmatic considerations to endorse public deliberation. Local government in Kuna and Portsmouth, for example, used study circles because they were dealing with thorny issues where public input became an attractive way to overcome an impasse. Self-interest can also sometimes support deliberation. Moved by political calculations, officials sometimes decide that they need to feel the public's pulse before embarking on a course of action. Public deliberation can help them to gauge public sentiment and reduce polarization among their constituents.

### **Deliberative capacity**

Embedded public deliberation also requires the maintenance of local capacities to organize and convene such discussions. At the very minimum, those capacities include the presence of trained moderators and facilitators in a community, the administrative wherewithal to organize deliberative events, and the capability to mobilize and recruit participants. Another "deliberative capacity" is the ability to gain the attention

of local decision makers to participate in deliberative events and to utilize the resulting recommendations. Finally, connections between those who deliberate and local institutions—community newspapers and radio, churches, schools, businesses, and social service providers—extend the reach of deliberation beyond direct participants to the many others who do not engage directly.

In our case studies, independent civic organizations, such as Kuna ACT, Portsmouth Listens, and the United Way, housed local deliberative capacity. Less common, deliberative capacity is housed within governmental agencies. Provided they can secure funding, such groups create a professional home for deliberative entrepreneurs to practice their craft, organize it, and reproduce it.

### **Demand for democracy**

Finally, we reason that lasting and durable embeddedness of public reflection, but especially public action, requires that constituencies be disposed to mobilize to defend their organizations, institutions, and practices. Even in communities where local politicians or policymakers are open toward public deliberation, they may be replaced by others who are less favorably inclined. Or

they themselves may cool to notions of public deliberation if it hampers their other priorities or agendas.

Given these very real possibilities—even tendencies—local practices of deliberation are more likely to be sustained when countervailing forces, such as community organizations or mobilized citizens, act politically to defend or advance practices of public deliberation. We can see this need in Hawaii, for instance, where Senator Ihara champions public deliberation but finds tepid support among his legislative colleagues.

Although we were not able to identify instances when citizens mobilized to demand or defend deliberation, continued exposure to deliberative practices may generate this demand in the future. This aspect surely constitutes an important topic for future research. In general, our cases obscure the importance of this political factor because we selected communities in which local officials were supportive of deliberation.

These three conditions are particularly relevant for deliberative interventions in instances where the impact of deliberations depends on the interaction between citizens and government. Political authority and demand for democracy may not be critical when it comes to deliberative reflection because its impact is confined to the personal level.

## Three Conditions for Embedding Deliberation

### ***Political Authority***

Political authorities must support public deliberation and be willing to take its results into consideration and even to share authority with bodies of directly deliberating citizens.

### ***Deliberative Capacity***

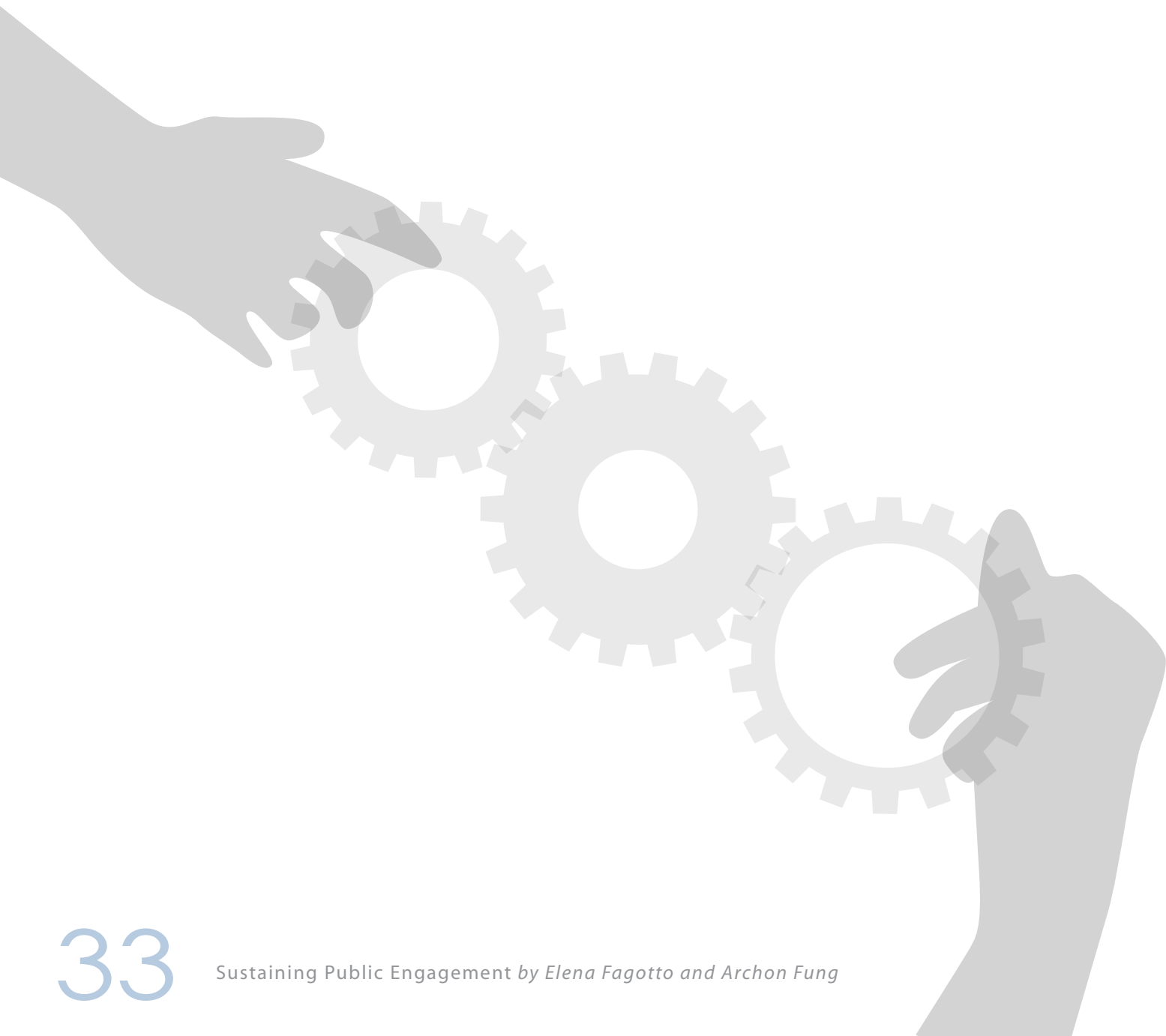
Public, or more often civic, organizations in the community must develop the resources and expertise to organize and convene structured deliberations, to mobilize people to participate in those deliberations, and to engage policymakers and other local institutions.

### ***Demand for Democracy***

There should be a popular constituency that is disposed to press for public deliberation and to defend its practice when such engagement becomes inconvenient to local elites and authorities. (This condition is very rare.)

Laying out these three conditions may aid deliberative entrepreneurs in selecting promising communities in which to invest resources in deliberative reform. Given a choice, it is better to work in communities where political leaders are friendly to deliberation, where there are organizations that can be long-term allies in sponsoring forums and associated activities, and where the possibilities for forming organized constituencies seem positive. Clearly,

many deliberative entrepreneurs lack the luxury of selecting places that are ripe for embedding deliberation. Although they may have to choose other options to drive social change, being mindful of the conditions for embeddedness should nevertheless help them understand how to cultivate these factors to prepare the ground for deliberative interventions in the future. Understanding these conditions may also guide reform efforts in particular communities.





## Measuring Embeddedness: Tentative Benchmarks

**H**ow do we know whether deliberative reflection and action are embedded in community institutions and practices? In this section we offer some benchmarks that might be used to measure deliberative embeddedness, although discussion of these indicators should be read as an exhortation to further research and reflection.

In the course of this research project, we were unable to gather quantitative indicators for our case studies, although clearly such data would be useful in the future. We encourage practitioners to collect such data when it is available and to reflect upon what kinds of quantitative indicators constitute valid and useful measures of deliberative success. The broader use of such indicators by both

researchers and practitioners would press the field forward in at least three ways:

- It would help to improve the quality of strategic management in deliberative organizations.
- It would facilitate comparative case research of the sort detailed in this report.
- It would aid in gauging the relative merits of deliberative and participatory governance compared to other approaches that demand less civic engagement.

The most important purpose of developing such criteria is to aid deliberative practitioners by guiding their actions and helping them diagnose the quality of their projects. It is easy to develop poor metrics or to misuse otherwise helpful metrics. It would be a mistake, for example, to ignore the ways



*Deliberative initiatives aim to repair different democratic deficits, and different aims call for varied measures of embeddedness and success.*

in which the particular circumstances of a given community might make some metrics inappropriate. As noted above, deliberative initiatives aim to repair different democratic deficits, and different aims call for varied measures of embeddedness and success.

We would say that deliberation—both in its moments of reflection and of action—is deeply embedded in a community where citizens regularly convene to deliberate and act on the results of their deliberations in response to important problems or challenges arising in that community. If we presume that problems and challenges arise with some frequency in most communities, one important indicator of embeddedness is simply the number and frequency with which deliberative events occur. In places like New Castle County, Kansas City, Kuna, Portsmouth, and certain communities in Connecticut, they occurred with some frequency. A more refined measure would take into account the importance of issues that spur public deliberation. If a community deliberated about trivial matters while important ones escaped collective notice and reflection, we would say that deliberation is not well embedded in that community.

### **Tentative Benchmarks to Measure Embeddedness**

- 1.** Number and frequency of deliberative events.
- 2.** Relevance of the deliberations' topics to the community.
- 3.** Number of participants. A higher number of participants may be relevant in cases of embedded public reflection, but smaller numbers of committed participants can also affect public action.
- 4.** Number of private or public organizations, agencies, or government institutions touched by deliberation.
- 5.** Impact on individuals (obtained from pre/post interviews) and on policymakers and public policies (more difficult to identify).

It is tempting to count the number of people who participate in deliberations over time as a benchmark of embeddedness. While more is usually better in this regard, it is important to be attentive to the purpose of some deliberative interventions. If the aim, for example, is to repair social fabric and address large social challenges through personal transformation, then it is indeed important that a substantial percentage of the population engage in public deliberation. If, on the other hand, the aim is to inform policymakers or hold them accountable, the relatively small number of participants in citizens juries and other associated mechanisms may be sufficient.<sup>8</sup> Deliberations that aim to mobilize citizens to solve local problems and improve the quality of local public goods fall between these two poles in terms of the ideal number of participants over time.

Counting the number of organizations, public agencies, or other government institutions that at some point used deliberative practices to carry out some of their functions is another reasonable benchmark of embeddedness. Considering that inviting organizations to deliberations, training them as facilitators, or involving them in the teams that organize deliberative events could predispose them to use such practices at a later time, one could use the overall number of organizations that have had some exposure to deliberation. Clearly, using this measure, the embeddedness of deliberations that

require the formation of large organizing coalitions, such as Community Conversations in Connecticut or study circles in Delaware and Kansas City, would be deeper than that of deliberative catalysts that convene forums without involving many partners in the organizing phase.

Finally, measuring the impact of public deliberation is another way to quantify embeddedness. In this case, deliberations that have a more profound and sustained impact on individuals, communities, and institutions would be the most embedded. The challenge in using this benchmark is that while measuring impact on individuals, using pre- and post-deliberative event surveys, may be relatively easy, tracing the impact of deliberations on institutions and their policies may prove more difficult. When we asked policymakers about the impact of deliberations on their decisions, by and large they responded that deliberations did have some influence, but that they were generally just one factor among a number of others. Only rarely did they admit that outcomes from deliberations played a dominant role in their decisions.

In spite of their limitations and lack of refinement, the measures of embeddedness offered above are a first step in attempting to quantify the success of community-level deliberation. Additional research is needed to shed light on these questions and identify more appropriate benchmarks.

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<sup>8</sup> Consider, for example, the case of the British Columbia Citizens' Assembly, where a randomly selected group of 160 citizens met for a series of deliberations throughout 2004 to study different electoral systems and propose a new electoral law for the Canadian province. See: <http://www.citizensassembly.bc.ca/public>



## Strategies for Establishing and Sustaining Deliberation

**N**ow that we know what kinds of deliberative interventions can address the democratic deficits of the policymaking process and how embeddedness can sustain the impact of deliberations, we turn to the strategy and choices adopted by those who first introduced deliberation in their communities or organizations. Did they promote deliberation to achieve a specific purpose, or did they seize the political opportunity to introduce it at a time of crisis? How did they succeed? What strategic considerations did they make? Were alliances with institutions formed to secure support and resources?

In most of the cases we examined, deliberative entrepreneurs played a key role in introducing deliberative reforms into previously nondeliberative environments. As we explained elsewhere,<sup>9</sup> these entrepreneurs identify “markets” or opportunities where injecting public deliberation could improve community relations or policymaking. The entrepreneurs plant the seeds of deliberative practice, and sometimes their work gives birth to centers that promote deliberation and assist organizations that seek public input or want to increase civic engagement. The presence of a deliberative entrepreneur is a *sine qua non* for the establishment of deliberation.

Deliberative entrepreneurs operate with different theories of change. Although we have discussed this only marginally with the deliberative entrepreneurs we interviewed

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<sup>9</sup> Elena Fagotto and Archon Fung, *Embedded Deliberation: Entrepreneurs, Organizations, and Public Action* (final report for the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, April 14, 2006).



(because this line of inquiry is beyond the scope of our research), understanding their theory of change is highly relevant. Generalizing, we can identify two schools of thought among such entrepreneurs: focus on changing the beliefs and behaviors of those who participate directly in public deliberations or address citizens and public institutions more broadly.

The first group believes that instilling the principles of deliberation in citizens will increase their tolerance of diversity, make them more reflective and informed, and thus create more active and collaborative citizens. Instilling these principles will improve communications and relations among family members and colleagues as well as promote more awareness and reflection in public life. In turn this is likely to translate into more reasoned political choices, more civic engagement, and more demand for accountability from elected officials. In this view, social change is driven by citizens who would propagate the principles of deliberation in public life.

The second group believes that deliberation can better inform individuals and mobilize them to take action and that it also works with public institutions—often at the local government level—to introduce deliberative practices in their decision-making processes. For these deliberative entrepreneurs, addressing citizens alone is not enough. It is critical to involve institutions as partners in deliberation and public action. These entrepreneurs use deliberation to mobilize

citizens and to advance the objectives of certain public institutions that are willing to collaborate with citizens or even delegate some of their prerogatives in collaborative governance arrangements.

The visions of deliberative entrepreneurs are complex and nuanced and, clearly, this is a highly stylized description, but it is nevertheless useful because it helps identify areas where entrepreneurs can be supported. Our theories of embedded public reflection and action may offer new perspectives to those who espouse both schools of thought.

What is the rationale that entrepreneurs use to justify deliberative interventions? That is, how do they explain to themselves and to others why potentially costly and disruptive strategies of deliberation are worth pursuing? Our observations suggest that they generally follow one or more of three entry points for creating and increasing public deliberation: specific local problems, civic and democratic benefits, and embracing political roadblocks as opportunities.

### **Specific local problems**

Entrepreneurs can lead by identifying seemingly intractable problems to promote deliberation as a problem-solving innovation. For example, failure to involve minority parents in school life through traditional channels was an important entry point to promote Community Conversations in Connecticut and study circles in Kansas City and Montgomery County. Crises, such as episodes of school violence or polarization



*We have observed that civic entrepreneurs make different strategic alliances, depending on the nature of the deliberative intervention they promote.*

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over public policy choices, can also provide an opportunity for deliberative interventions. The Columbine shootings prompted a Portsmouth coalition active on youth violence issues to promote a 300-person forum on teen violence. In Kuna and Portsmouth, tensions over controversial drug testing and school redistricting policies were resolved by convening study circles, which gave voice to the community.

### **Civic and democratic benefits**

Some entrepreneurs focus on broader purposes of public deliberation, such as improving relations among community members and, indirectly, improving the quality of public dialogue and civic life. By and large, National Issues Forums are held with the purpose of providing a venue where citizens can engage in a collective reflection over public policies. The Indigenous Issues Forums intend to create a safe venue where indigenous people can deliberate and where individuals can learn to respectfully interact with others.

### **Embracing political roadblocks as opportunities**

Political challenges and circumstances can provide a third point of entry for deliberative

entrepreneurs. That is, public engagement can sometimes help policymakers and politicians break through political logjams. In Kuna, for example, school board members suffered a public rebuke in a ballot question on school construction finance. Organized public deliberation provided an opportunity for them to explain their case and for community members to reflect upon it.

In Hawaiian locales, Senator Ihara introduced public forums to discuss polarized issues—from death with dignity to allowing gambling in the state—that could not be addressed through traditional political bargaining. Forums helped reduce tensions and provided people with a more nuanced understanding of the issues at stake and their implications.

How do entrepreneurs form alliances with other groups that can help spread deliberation and utilize these networks to advance the specific purposes they have? We have observed that civic entrepreneurs make different strategic alliances, depending on the nature of the deliberative intervention they promote. Let's start by examining the strategic choices civic entrepreneurs make when they want to achieve embedded public reflection.

Institutional support is crucial to engage

residents in regular dialogues that change them as individuals, or inform their public judgment and instill the habit of public deliberation in a community. Institutional partners can provide credibility and resources. Being affiliated with a reputable institution with good connections in the community facilitates embedding deliberation and forming partnerships. In New Castle County, for example, YWCA promotion of study circles facilitated a successful outreach effort. In West Virginia, public deliberation thrived due in part to a visionary deliberative entrepreneur, but also due to the strong backing of the University of Charleston.

Institutions can also provide concrete resources, such as financial support, staff, or office space. All of these elements are critical in organizing effective deliberations over time. Another important consideration is the neutrality of the organizations. We noticed that many deliberative entrepreneurs established alliances with nonpartisan institutions, such as universities, because deliberations that are perceived as self-serving or driven by partisan agendas can undermine participation.

Deliberative entrepreneurs in Hawaii, South Dakota, and West Virginia depend on institutional support to sustain deliberative practices and conduct annual facilitator trainings and public deliberations, mainly using the National Issues Forums model. In these cases, institutional support comes from the University of Hawaii, the Chiesman Foundation, and the University of Charleston,

respectively. In New Castle County, the local YWCA has supported deliberation. The Indigenous Issues Forums, on the other hand, have chosen not to create a single strong institutional alliance to embed deliberation. Instead, they established relationships with several local institutions, such as churches and libraries, to promote deliberation.

All these study sites have embedded deliberative public reflection to some extent, but some have been more successful than others in holding frequent deliberations and increasing the number of citizens exposed to deliberation. Promoting deliberation with other institutions and harnessing their capacities and networks significantly increased the number of participants, as shown especially in the New Castle County case, but also in West Virginia.

In New Castle County, more than 12,000 people participated in study circles. Because the initiative was sponsored by the YWCA, the effort benefited from the network, reputation, and resources of its institutional sponsor, reaching out to more than 140 organizations, which included not only public institutions like the Department of Labor and some local schools, but also large corporations like Dupont.

The YWCA's sponsorship has helped the New Castle County program in several ways. First of all, because of its reputation, many organizations interested in hosting dialogues on race contacted the YWCA for assistance. Second, the YWCA has nurtured a large group

of facilitators, who spread deliberation in their respective organizations. Third, the YWCA has promoted study circles as a vehicle for social change with other organizations. It even succeeded in embedding deliberation within the Department of Labor, which held study circles on race and on issues of gender and disability, showing that deliberation has been adopted as a versatile problem-solving tool.

In West Virginia, several universities and two NGOs adopted deliberations to advance their missions. College students, faculty, and staff participated in deliberations, were trained as facilitators, and ended up holding additional deliberations. Two NGOs trained their staff to hold dozens of forums across the state on issues of domestic violence and underage drinking.

Entrepreneurs who seek to embed public action face additional challenges. Like entrepreneurs who promote embedded public reflection, they need to think strategically of alliances that can secure the reputation, capacity, and resources to support deliberations. However, they also need to think of ways alliances can sustain action.

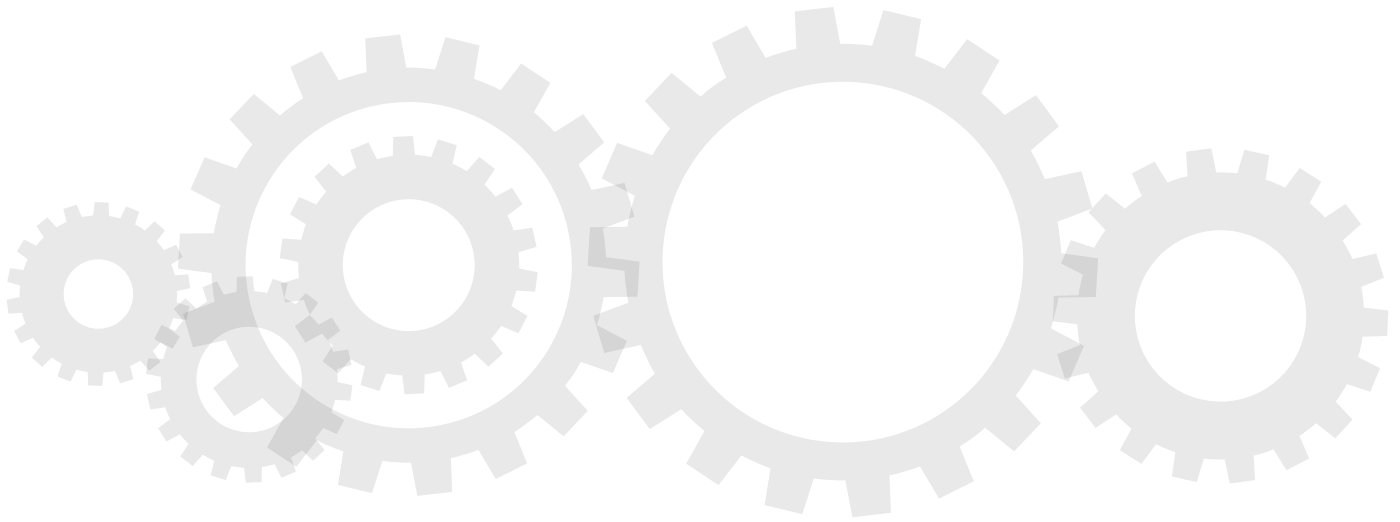
Consider the Connecticut Community Conversations. The foundation that sponsors the conversations secured resources and alliance with the League of Women Voters, which manages the project, and ensured credibility, outreach, and visibility. Additionally, the organizations that intend to hold deliberations are required to form large planning committees to guarantee outreach to a diverse constituency.

The organizations in the Connecticut planning

committees are generally well established and have the institutional capacity necessary to continue to mobilize participants even after the deliberations to implement their recommendations, and to hold other members of the committee accountable for doing the same. Shared leadership teams bring together organizations with different areas of expertise, spread organizing and follow-up tasks evenly, and ensure accountability among team members. Naturally, when action is desired the institutional actors that have the authority and resources to implement deliberative recommendations should be on board from the beginning.

Study circles have a similar organizing philosophy: there, too, convenors seek the support of a broad network of institutional partners to mobilize, from the beginning, the organizations and local government institutions that have the capacity to translate the deliberative input into action. Deliberations on underage drinking in Clarksburg, West Virginia, were successful because they were endorsed by the city council, the police, and other public and private agencies. At a forum, this coalition planned and implemented successful strategies to curb underage drinking and continued to work together well after the deliberations ended.

The Montgomery County Study Circles enjoy the highest level of institutional support among all our case studies, but they are an atypical example, as they were introduced by the local school district to close the achievement gap.



## Conclusion

In several communities across the United States, civic and political innovators have not only sponsored successful deliberations, but they have also incorporated deliberative practices into the ways that public decisions are made and public actions are taken. In doing so, these deliberative entrepreneurs often begin with the aim of using methods of public reflection to address particular, identifiable community problems. As they work to solve those problems, we have shown that they also develop reforms and structures that improve the very process of democratic governance.

This is not easy work. Success requires mobilizing citizens to engage in deliberation and often to take action following deliberation. It requires building civic organizations that can sponsor and facilitate public deliberation over controversial issues and community problems as they arise over time. And success often requires deliberative entrepreneurs to persuade reluctant politicians and policymakers to become allies

and supporters of civic engagement efforts, or at least to respond constructively.

All this is made still more complicated and challenging because there is no general recipe for embedding deliberation. Differences across contexts and communities matter, but that is always true and should go without saying. More fundamental, deliberative initiatives often aim at quite different problems with democratic governance—repairing social fabric, improving public judgment, bridging gaps between communities and government, holding government officials accountable, and mobilizing civic resources and energies. These different aims require different deliberative practices, organizational strategies, and forms of embeddedness. At the very least, we hope this report illuminates those differences and, perhaps most important, in showing how several communities have quite remarkably managed to improve the quality of local democratic governance by embedding deliberation, we hope we have provided some inspiration and guidance to others who may wish to pursue those ends.

## About the Authors

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Elena Fagotto researches deliberative democracy, citizen engagement in governance, and regulation by transparency. After working for six years at the Harvard Kennedy School, where she is a member of the Transparency Policy Project, Fagotto returned to her native Europe. On behalf of an Italian policy analysis institute, she is currently investigating how transparency could engage Italian communities and improve public education. She is also a visiting professor at LUISS University in Rome. For her research, she observed many deliberative events nationally and internationally. She co-authored a book chapter, reports, case studies, and articles published in the *Journal of Policy Analysis and Management*, the *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*, *Economic Analysis*, and *Issues in Science and Technology*.





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Archon Fung is the Ford Foundation Professor of Democracy and Citizenship at the Harvard Kennedy School. His research examines the impacts of civic participation, public deliberation, and transparency upon public and private governance. Recent books include *Full Disclosure: The Perils and Promise of Transparency* (Cambridge University Press, with Mary Graham and David Weil) and *Empowered Participation: Reinventing Urban Democracy* (Princeton University Press). He has authored 5 books, 3 edited collections, and over 50 articles appearing in journals including *American Political Science Review*, *Public Administration Review*, *Political Theory*, *Journal of Political Philosophy*, *Politics and Society*, *Governance*, *Journal of Policy and Management*, *Environmental Management*, *American Behavioral Scientist*, *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*, and *Boston Review*.

The background features a light gray illustration of several hands reaching towards the center, with several interlocking gears of various sizes scattered around. A dotted line of small black circles forms a semi-circle above the main title.

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