

Creating Citizens Through Public Deliberation

By Scott London



How Civic Organizations in Ten Countries
Are Using Deliberative Dialogue to Build
and Strengthen Democracy.

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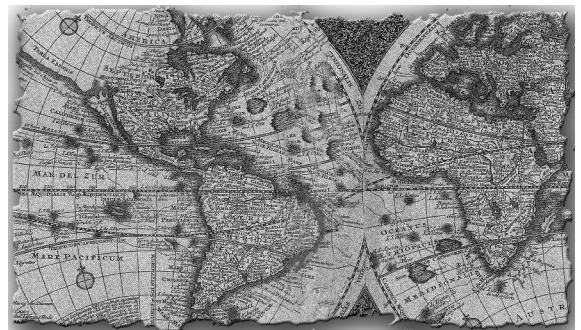
Democracy was formally reestablished in Argentina in 1983, putting an end to a long line of political coups, guerrilla uprisings, and corrupt military dictatorships. While the transition marked the beginning of a new and promising chapter in Argentine political life, many feared that democracy would be short-lived. A half-century of social and political unrest had crippled the economy, brought the government to the verge of bankruptcy, and hollowed out many of the nation's public institutions. The Argentine people certainly embraced the idea of democracy and welcomed a new era of popular government. But after being shut out of the decision-making process for so long, many were wary of politics and reluctant to take part in rebuilding the nation.

After two decades, the political situation in Argentina is still shaky and uncertain. The country is in the grip of an acute financial crisis, unemployment has reached record highs, and as recently as 2002 public anger and cynicism erupted in violent street riots and spontaneous pot-banging protests against the government. Whether Argentina can find its way out of the current crisis without turning its back on democracy remains to be seen.

ARGENTINA

In response to the current crisis, many Argentines have banded together to reclaim their public voice. Reports suggest that some citizens are taking democracy into their own hands. In town squares, parks and cafés, neighbors are busy discussing how to make government more accountable. They are talking about creating a “citizen’s congress” to demand transparency and accountability from politicians and exploring the idea of participatory budgets and shorter political terms. They have also taken to organizing communal kitchens for the unemployed and staging film festivals in the streets. As the *Wall Street Journal* put it, these neighborhood assemblies “offer new forums for civic participation by Argentines alienated from their leaders — and each other.”

The fabric of Argentine civil society has been frayed by the recent crisis, but it has not come undone. At least some of the credit for that belongs to a small but growing number of citizen organizations working to build community and foster democratic values at the grassroots level. Working at the intersection of the public and private spheres, their work is rooted in the idea that a democracy must be built from the ground up and that it requires an informed and active citizenry. Throughout the country, these institutions have been instrumental in creating political awareness, boosting civic participation, forging ties within and between communities, and fostering the habits of effective democratic citizenship.



For two organizations, Poder Ciudadano and Asociación Conciencia, a core element of the work involves bringing people together to dialogue and deliberate as citizens. In neighborhoods and communities throughout Argentina, they have engaged people in public dialogues on issues ranging from government corruption and pollution to the role of women in

society. As they see it, the act of coming together to explore an issue, weigh different policy options, negotiate potential tradeoffs, and find common ground not only helps to forge a substantive public agenda but also goes a long way toward cultivating an engaged citizenry.

The work of Poder Ciudadano and Asociación Conciencia draws on a long-standing tradition that dates back through the meetings of early New England townspeople all the way to the agoras of ancient Greece. It is an approach that is particularly well-suited to Argentina, according to Roberto Saba, former executive director of Poder Ciudadano, who teaches law at the University of Palermo in Buenos Aires. “The main problem in Argentina is a lack of trust,” he says. “People are eager to do something about politics, but they are uneasy about politicians. They want to act, but they need to know what to do. That means talking to each other. The deliberative process teaches people skills, and at the same time gives them the tools to have an impact.”

For Constanza Gorleri, one of the architects of Conciencia’s community development programs, public deliberation is vital in a country where people have been shut out of the political process for so long. Open dialogue helps people transform anger and bitterness into effective public action. People must learn to act more rationally by talking things through, she says. “I think that words also build democracy. By discussing and deliberating, people get to know what they really think. So when they act, it is more rational and efficient.”

Both Asociación Conciencia and Poder Ciudadano are nonpartisan citizen organizations aimed at promoting public awareness and civic participation in Argentina. Conciencia (Spanish for Awareness) was founded in 1982 to promote community engagement, particularly among women. Vice President Dora Scacciatì recalls that when she and her colleagues first started organizing public dialogues in 1982, “middle-aged, middle-class Argentine women didn’t dare to talk about politics in front of their husbands.” By using carefully structured forums with women — in some cases incorporating smaller breakout groups to encourage more reticent participants — Conciencia worked hard to break the taboo.

Today, the organization consists of a network of 36 chapters throughout the Argentine provinces and in many suburbs and neighborhoods of Buenos Aires. It works with more than 4,500 associates and volunteers in schools, trade unions, businesses, and local governments. Its projects include the dissemination of electoral information, the publication of newsletters and reports, and the hosting of seminars and leadership development programs.

Deliberative forums are an important feature of Conciencia’s work and have been integrated into several of its ongoing activities. In the Community Development Program, for example, the deliberative approach has been used to help communities “work through” difficult issues. Colonia Barragán, a small farming town in central Argentina, is a case in point. For years, the community struggled with poverty, poor education, alcoholism, and domestic violence. Despite various types of assistance programs from the state, the community was caught in a downward spiral. Asociación Conciencia was invited to help the community address the problem. “We decided to have a public forum,” recalls Constanza Gorleri, to “let the community come together to name the problem and find a solution.”

The first forum was attended by only seven people. The second drew a few more. As people began to talk, it became clear that “they wanted to talk about the problems behind the problems,” Gorleri says. One of their chief concerns was the poor quality of elementary education in the community. Because the children were underprepared for high school, many never made it through to graduation and this was having serious repercussions in the community. As they discussed various ways to solve the problem, they hit on the idea of a community training center where young people could receive tutoring assistance and adults could get information and basic vocational guidance. “They felt that if children were better prepared they would have more opportunities and hope after high school,” Gorleri says. “That could lead to less alcoholism and domestic violence.”

As a result of these and subsequent forums, the community decided to build a chapel to be used as a part-time training center. The entire community took part in the design and construction of the building. They also invited an agricultural expert to the community to inform the farmers about new technologies and planting methods. More significantly, the townspeople have continued to meet every Monday evening to discuss other projects in the community.

The renewal of Colonia Barragán was “a direct result of the community deliberating together about their common problems,” Gorleri points out. “People discovered what was valuable to them. Deliberation helped them find shared purposes and directions, as well as what they wanted government to do for them.”

Like Asociación Conciencia, Poder Ciudadano (Citizen Power) is a nongovernmental organization (NGO). It was founded in 1989 by six individuals representing a diversity of political views and professional backgrounds. They shared the belief that democracy involves more than simply casting a vote; at its best, democracy involves citizens taking responsibility for the life they have in common. Poder Ciudadano was founded on the belief that it is possible for citizens to work together even though they might not share the same lifestyles, interests, or political agendas. The organization also emphasizes that civic awareness and responsibility are the best defense against government corruption. Since 1995, Poder Ciudadano has served as the Argentine chapter of Transparency International, a nongovernmental organization headquartered in Berlin that studies institutional corruption and works to promote government accountability.

From the outset, Poder Ciudadano saw public deliberation as an essential tool in fostering political awareness and participation. In its efforts to combat government corruption, for example, the organization spent two years calling attention to the fact that the lack of public accountability in Argentina is not the government’s problem — it’s the people’s problem. As Roberto Saba points out, bringing people together to deliberate about corruption was the best way to move the discussion beyond name-calling and finger-pointing to a search for real solutions. “For the first time,” Saba recalls, “Argentines were talking about corruption in terms of public policy.”

Both Asociación Conciencia and Poder Ciudadano have built extensive forum networks throughout Argentina. Conciencia’s efforts in this area fall into two categories: civic education through high schools and universities, and community forums on local and national issues. In the first, students are encouraged to look at politics as a process involving citi-

zens, not just political leaders. They are given the opportunity to deliberate together about the pros and cons of various public issues and then reach a “public perspective.” Forums are also organized in which students, parents, and teachers can collectively explore issues such as juvenile violence and unemployment. In addition, *Conciencia*’s 36 local chapters organize numerous community forums each year on issues ranging from corruption to political representation to public education. These efforts often involve collaborations with community leaders, local officials, business leaders, and trade unions. *Conciencia* also conducts forums in conjunction with its regional networks and community-development programs.

Poder Ciudadano’s efforts to promote public deliberation take several forms. The organization works with *Conciencia* and other civic organizations to provide materials and technical assistance to communities and groups throughout the country. It serves as a focal point and clearinghouse for an extensive network of schools, universities, civic groups, and news organizations with a commitment to civic engagement. It also works directly with schools and universities to develop civic education curricula that emphasize the skills of deliberative group inquiry.

A key component of organizing citizen forums involves preparing information and background materials that can serve as a framework for discussion, particularly on issues of national significance. *Poder Ciudadano* began developing issue books in 1992. The first one, prepared by Roberto Saba during a ten-month fellowship at the Kettering Foundation in Dayton, Ohio, tackled the problem of government corruption. It was followed by five others on issues ranging from public safety to the strained relationship between the public and government.

Asociación Conciencia has also developed several issue books. One examines the problem of governance and political representation. Another takes up the role of women in Argentine society. A third addresses the issue of public education. Lelia Mooney, who has played a central role in developing the organization’s public deliberation programs, believes that a good issue book is based not only on hard data and solid research, but also on focus groups in the community. The guides need to stimulate and promote thoughtful dialogue, she says, while at the same time orienting it toward practical solutions.

In addition to organizing community forums and preparing issue books, *Asociación Conciencia* and *Poder Ciudadano* sponsor workshops and training seminars on a regular basis. For example, *Asociación Conciencia* brings together associates and volunteers from its various chapters throughout the country to introduce the deliberative methodology, demonstrate how to frame public issues, and train forum moderators. These sessions usually consist of a forum followed by a review of the concept of deliberation and the different roles citizens play in the policy-making process. They may also provide some guidelines for how to moderate a forum.

As public deliberation has become more commonly understood and practiced in Argentina, other organizations have also embraced the methodology. In Buenos Aires, for example, the nonprofit organization *Fundación Ciudad* has convened an extensive series

of public forums on quality-of-life issues such as sustainable development, air and noise pollution, and habitat restoration. The organization's goal, as stated in the mission statement, is "to place urban issues on the public agenda and to generate wide-ranging deliberation in hopes of finding consensual solutions and conveying them to policymakers." Since the mid-1990s, the organization has developed a half-dozen issue books and engaged thousands of Buenos Aires residents in deliberative forums on pressing urban issues.

Asociación Conciencia and Poder Ciudadano's influence has also started to spread to other countries. Under the auspices of the Inter-American Democracy Network, a groundbreaking USAID-funded initiative aimed at promoting civil society throughout the Americas, the two organizations work together with a diverse and far-flung network of non-governmental agencies throughout North, Central, and South America. Over the past eight years, the network has grown to include more than 100 associate members, organizations working on issues such as family planning and microenterprise development. The goal is to infuse public deliberation and civic engagement into every aspect of their work and to underscore the critical role of the individual citizen in making democracy work from the ground up.

In 1995, Asociación Conciencia and Poder Ciudadano took the lead in establishing the Inter-American Democracy Network along with four other organizations — the Santiago-based Corporación Participa, the political science department of the Universidad de los Andes in Bogotá, Instituto de Investigación y Autoformación Política in Guatemala City, and the Washington, D.C.-based Partners of the Americas. While the six founding organizations coordinate most of the activities of the network and provide technical assistance as needed, the system is designed to be decentralized and self-sustaining.

In addition to its role as coordinating member of the Inter-American Democracy Network, Asociación Conciencia has expanded its own activities to other countries in Central and Latin America. The organization now has chapters in Bolivia, Brazil, Colombia, Costa Rica, Ecuador, Honduras, Nicaragua, Panama, and Peru, along with a Cuban chapter based in Miami. The organization currently coordinates its programs with 16 similar associations through the Pan-American Civic Organization.

These networks within networks suggest that civil society is playing an increasingly important role in Central and Latin America, providing a free space — independent of states and markets — in which democratic attitudes and behaviors can be cultivated. As organizations such as Asociación Conciencia and Poder Ciudadano continue to proliferate and join forces — in Argentina and beyond — they are laying the groundwork for a more vibrant civil society, one that can serve as a bulwark against the forces of authoritarianism and safeguard essential democratic freedoms.



Brazil has been described as a slumbering giant, a nation that has yet to awaken to its full potential as a global power. With a land mass nearly the size of the United States, some of the world's richest agricultural and cattle lands, vast natural resources, and a burgeoning economy twice the size of Russia's and almost as big as China's, Brazil plays an increasingly prominent role in international trade. But for all its prowess as an economic power, the country is still plagued by a host of social and political maladies — from severe socioeconomic cleavages and mass poverty to widespread corruption and government inefficiency.

Brazil has had a popularly elected government since 1986, but democracy has yet to fully take root. Public institutions are weak. The rule of law is unevenly enforced. Corruption scandals abound. And more often than not, citizens see themselves as the helpless victims of bad government. The political situation was summed up in the title of a recent article by University of Oxford's Leslie Bethell: "From Elections without Democracy to Democracy without Citizenship."

BRAZIL

"Our history of representative democracy is fairly young," observes Telma Gimenez of the University of Londrina in Paraná. "The Brazilian people have a long history of being subjects. They still think of politicians as people who are supposed to solve their problems. It's part of our tradition." Many people have a distorted view of democracy, she says. They see their vote as more of a transaction than a civic responsibility. "People say, 'I need a pair of glasses. If you promise to give me a pair of glasses, I'll vote for you.' So they don't really take responsibility for the greater good."

The lack of civic values poses a problem for Brazil, says Maria Izabel Marca of Instituto Jaime Lerner in Curitiba, Paraná. Without the habits of democratic citizenship, people have no way of addressing their common problems, let alone building a better future for themselves and their children. People are not only unaware of their rights and responsibilities as citizens, Marca says, "they don't care about them. They are not used to democracy. They have no idea how to do it, or even that they have the power to do it."



Because of Brazil's continental proportions and vast economic disparities, levels of civic participation vary a great deal from region to region. People in the agricultural north rely more heavily on the government than those in the industrial south, where civic engagement is comparatively high. As Marca points out, people in the north "are not worried about the president, about taxes, or about what is going on in the rest of Brazil. They are worried about basic necessities — what they will eat tomorrow, or when they will have rain to water the crops."

Meanwhile, Brazil's better educated, more affluent urban residents tend to be deeply cynical of the political system. Excessive bureaucracy, a ponderous legalistic ethos, the residual effects of clientelism, and the gridlock of competing interest groups has given Brazil's government a bad name. In common parlance, says Marca, the term politics denotes

corruption and bad politicians. “It’s very difficult in Brazil for officeholders and citizens to work together because they don’t respect each other.”

Gimenez and Marca belong to a growing network of civic educators working to strengthen public awareness and participation in Brazil. They believe that cultivating the habits of democratic citizenship is the first step in addressing problems like poverty, rural migration, violence, and poor education. In a country without a tradition of voluntarism and civic participation, people must find ways to work together. That begins with learning how to talk with one another.

Since the mid-1990s, the universities of Londrina and Ponta Grossa have worked together to promote public deliberation in neighborhoods and communities throughout the state of Paraná.

They see it as a way to strengthen civil society and narrow the gap between citizens and officeholders. The process provides a framework for exploring issues that lets people listen to one another, consider alternative points of view, explore a range of potential solutions, and generally establish common ground. At its best, it can also give citizens a voice in shaping policy directions on public issues.

Jorge Edison Ribeiro and Vanessa Saboia Zappia, architects of the universities’ joint “Citizen Forums” program, point out that the work has had a dramatic impact over the past seven or eight years. Public deliberation has not only heightened civic engagement, they note, it has also deepened people’s awareness of social and political issues and exposed them to a range of alternative viewpoints.

Ribeiro and Zappia launched the “Citizen Forums” program in 1995. The initial round of dialogues, held in five cities throughout Paraná, brought together some 800 participants to explore the troubled relationship between citizens and government. Using carefully prepared discussion guides and a video program designed to stimulate dialogue, participants discussed how politicians could be held more accountable to the public and how to improve the legitimacy of the political system. The results of the forums were then shared with local officeholders and community leaders to promote an ongoing dialogue between the community and its elected representatives.

The model has nurtured public discourse on a range of issues and helped people in many parts of Paraná work toward a civic agenda. It has also aided local communities in their search for solutions to common problems. In 1998, for example, the newly incorporated city of Pinhais outside Curitiba invited the university team to organize a series of community dialogues on environmental protection. Situated in one of the last remaining greenbelts surrounding Curitiba, Pinhais is subject to some of the strictest environmental laws in the country. But local property owners were complaining about the lack of infrastructure and services needed to observe the regulations.

After consulting with community officials, the university team brought together a variety of stakeholders — elected representatives, community activists, business leaders, and

property owners — to discuss the issue. The meeting uncovered two important facts: the community harbored a deep mistrust of local government and they lacked a clear understanding of their basic rights and responsibilities as citizens. The group reconvened a month later to discuss possible remedies, from improving the relationship between officeholders and local residents to promoting greater ecological awareness in the community.

On the basis of these initial discussions, a series of community forums was organized to explore the issue at greater depth and to identify potential solutions. The process engaged the entire community and led to a detailed plan of action that included the formation of a property-owners' association and the introduction of new tax codes and systems of municipal record keeping.

Looking back on the experience, Telma Gimenez describes the process as “an interesting attempt by officeholders to get closer to the community and involve them in taking responsibility for the conservation of the area.” It also allowed “a new relationship” to develop between the people and their local government, one in which the burden of responsibility extended beyond officeholders to include citizens themselves. “Both meetings were good opportunities for the participants to start creating a sense of ownership of the problem and its possible solutions.”

For the universities of Londrina and Ponta Grossa, the work no longer revolves exclusively around convening and moderating dialogues, as it did in the beginning. “We are not as focused on forums anymore,” Gimenez says. “Now we are looking for ways to fit deliberative practices into our existing programs and activities. If there is a project going on, we think: ‘How can the deliberative process help improve the quality of the work?’”

The “Citizen Forums” project has its roots in a USAID-funded program in the early 1990s that brought together several other nongovernmental organizations as well. Administered by Partners of the Americas, the initiative aimed to introduce public deliberation in civic education programs throughout Brazil. Solange Manzochi, currently vice president of the Paraná Council on Education, was a key player in organizing the project. She sees a very important role for deliberation in the classroom. Because Brazilian students attend school only half-days, she says, educators have an opportunity to offer courses beyond those required by the state education ministry. In her view, forums for students between the ages of 12 and 14 help to cultivate the habits of dialogue and deliberation. She is also a proponent of evening forums where students and parents come together to explore important community issues.

Colmeia, a São Paulo-based organization that provides guidance and vocational training to young people at risk, has taken a similar approach. Vice President Ina Ouang believes that deliberative dialogue fosters a sense of agency and empowerment among young people. “It’s not successful if you just ask people to come and deliberate,” she says. But when they have a role in choosing and framing the issue, they tend to have more invested in the process. “In our case, what happened was that the kids learned to listen to each other. They felt that the issue they chose came from them, not from the top. They thought about it, they chose it, and they were convinced it was important.”

Ouang and her colleagues first limited the use of public deliberation to their dialogues with young people. But after a series of successful forums they expanded the program to include parents as well. “What we tried to do was see what kind of common issue would be interesting to both generations,” she recalls. The parents maintained that discipline was the most pressing issue. The kids, for their part, felt that the most serious problem was violence. “They felt that they were being pushed into violence,” she says, “that they were compelled to be violent in order to survive. And they didn’t feel that was a natural thing.”

What became clear from talking to both the young people and their parents was that neither side felt understood by the other. This discovery served as the basis for a series of six two-hour forums on discipline. Supported by background materials and an issue booklet, the discussions explored a range of potential solutions. The results were very encouraging, Ouang says. “We were bonding parents with their children. They didn’t know that was possible, so it was very exciting.” After the initial six forums, the group decided to continue the dialogue and open it up to other members of the community as well.

As a civic leader, Ouang has played an integral role in a number of Brazilian NGOs. In 1987, she and four other women founded Voto Consciente, a nonprofit watchdog organization loosely modeled on the League of Women Voters. The group describes itself as “a brigade of citizens who believe that only active participation can bring change.”

For Voto Consciente, public deliberation is an important means of promoting civic awareness and participation. Public anger and frustration with government is seen not as an excuse to pull back from public life but as a point of entrée to a deeper and more meaningful kind of engagement. In its “Deliberative Forums” project, the organization creates what it calls “public space” — a process and a context that allows individuals to come into their own power as citizens. “The deliberative forum is a space for civic transformation,” reads one of the organization’s brochures. “By working together to identify problems and search for solutions, citizens generate public power.”

As part of its public deliberation initiative, Voto Consciente has developed a number of issue books that explore questions like public safety and the relationship between citizens and government. These are used in schools, community centers, and professional associations as a way to raise public awareness, encourage participation and debate, as well as deepen and expand the discussion of critical public issues.

As a member of the Inter-American Democracy Network, Voto Consciente has also collaborated with other organizations to develop educational materials, draft curriculum proposals, and train teachers in the art of deliberation. In 1998, for example, Voto Consciente translated and adapted materials originally developed by Asociación Conciencia in Argentina as the basis for a training seminar that brought together teachers from São Paulo, Osasco, Caraguatuba, Ilha Bela, São Bernardo, and Santa André.

Today, Voto Consciente plays an increasingly prominent role in Brazilian public life. By working directly with officials at the local and state level and demanding greater accountability and responsiveness to the public, the organization has come to represent — as its name implies — the conscience of the people. “There can be no doubt,” says Voto Consciente’s Rosângela Giembinsky, “that a lot of this is due to the credibility we have achieved through the forums.”



For more and more civic educators in Brazil, public deliberation is seen as a key to inculcating civic values and nurturing the habits of effective citizenship. It represents a way for citizens themselves to take ownership of the process while at the same time contributing something significant to the discourse of democracy. “I would resist calling it a technique,” observes Telma Gimenez. “What we’re aiming at is something broader. We’re aiming at people learning to think and relate to others in a different way. It is not only a technique, it is a set of procedures that has a rationale, a philosophy.”

While Colombia has one of the longest traditions of democracy in Latin America, public support for its political system has been badly shaken in recent years. Charges of corruption, a sluggish economy, high unemployment, and the escalation of a guerrilla conflict that has flashed and simmered for nearly four decades have left many Colombians anxious and disillusioned, convinced that the political system is out of touch with the people. A recent survey showed that a full 89 percent of the people lack confidence in the nation's political parties. The frustration is reflected in low levels of participation and declining voter turnout.

“The government has a legitimacy problem,” observed Dora Rothlisberger, a political scientist at *Universidad de los Andes* in Bogotá.* “When people start questioning the system, apathy grows and that translates into a lack of participation.” She believes that in a nation with complex socioeconomic problems, from high illiteracy rates and poor health care coverage to a widening gap between the rich and the poor, citizen participation is the first step in creating public awareness and mobilizing an agenda for change.

COLOMBIA

With her colleagues in the political science department at (UniAndes), Rothlisberger has developed a groundbreaking civic education program based on outreach and engagement in the community. The goal, in the words of political scientist Gabriel Murillo-Castaño, is “to create spaces where people can become aware of their power as citizens and work together with others to improve public problems.”

Much of UniAndes' work revolves around promoting public dialogue in neighborhoods and communities. Murillo, Rothlisberger, and their colleagues believe that building and strengthening civil society starts with giving people opportunities to voice their concerns in safe public venues. Over the past decade and a half, they have applied public deliberation in a wide range of settings, from public and private high schools to maximum security prisons to professional organizations.



In his book, *Building Citizenship through Public Deliberation*,** Murillo describes how he first became acquainted with the idea of public deliberation at a conference of the Western Hemisphere Exchange (WHE) in 1988. The idea had appeal, he writes, because it offered a method for citizens to “work through” a range of options on an issue and find their public voice without having to resort to conventional political debates or defer to experts. Inspired by what he learned, he and Rothlisberger visited the Kettering Foundation the following year to find out more about the methodology.

* Dora Rothlisberger passed away in 2003 as this publication went to press.

** Gabriel Murillo Castaño and Lariza Pizano Rojas: *Deliberación y construcción de ciudadanía: Una apuesta a la progresión democrática a comienzos del nuevo milenio* (Alfaomega Colombiana, S.A., 2003).

On their return to Colombia, Murillo and Rothlisberger designed a research proposal in collaboration with Fundaprogreso — a nongovernmental organization in Cali that develops regional issues forums, educational programs, and publications to promote citizen participation. The steering committee for the project chose the name *Foros de interés ciudadano*, or Citizen Interest Forums, avoiding the word “national” because, as Rothlisberger explained, “we don’t have a cohesive national identity yet.”

The project was aimed at promoting civic engagement not only among the educated middle classes but also and, especially, among those of lower socioeconomic standing who make up the sizeable part of the Colombian public. Given that 25 percent of the rural population and 10 percent of the urban population are illiterate, the project team planned issue books that were simple, short, and colloquial. They were also careful not to raise unrealistic expectations about the outcomes of the forums, presenting them as opportunities for dialogue rather than calls to action.

The team recognized early on that it had to begin with local issues and approach questions of national significance, if at all, through the lens of the local community. As Rothlisberger pointed out, “It is important that people see they are not alone in a sea of problems.” They also learned that participants respond better to forums when they are framed as a search for a “citizen agenda” rather than a general discussion about a public issue. “People in Colombia are very impatient with how every issue is diagnosed, and diagnosed!” Murillo said. “They don’t want to be involved unless they know that their participation will have a practical outcome.”

UniAndes’ first issue book took up the question of education and its role in the community. Titled *La educación y la comunidad* (“Education and the Community”), it was written by María Fernanda Cabal de Lafaurie during a fellowship at the Kettering Foundation in 1992-1993. While preparing the book, Cabal worked closely with the steering committee in Colombia to define the issue and the choices. She also tested it in several communities before it went to print. Issue books were also prepared on public safety and voter turnout.

In the intervening years, UniAndes has published briefing materials on a wide range of issues, from public safety and government corruption to the value of higher education and the rights and responsibilities of citizenship. The materials serve a dual purpose: they stimulate and guide open dialogue while at the same time promoting literacy. In some cases, starter videos are produced to augment the issue books.

Murillo stressed that the discussion guides are not always well received in the community. “In many cases, people reject the idea of receiving an issue book,” he said. “They feel that you are imposing a straitjacket on the discussion. Sometimes we have to put the issue book aside and let them discuss the issue in a more open-ended way.”

Over the past decade, UniAndes has incorporated public deliberation into a range of programs, from engaging low-income communities to improving relations between police officers and inner-city residents in Bogotá. In one of its most successful projects, UniAndes worked with the governor's office in the state of Atlántico to improve civic education in local high schools. Forums were held in ten rural communities in and around the seaport of Barranquilla. They began by dispensing with the traditional civics class, which most students found dull and uninspiring, and then restructuring the curriculum to give greater emphasis to dialogue, deliberation, and contact with local officials. In one forum, for example, the civics curriculum was expanded to include forums where students, teachers, community leaders, and government officials could all come together to discuss public issues.

The UniAndes team often works directly with rural townspeople to organize and moderate public forums. In some cases, communities lack even the most basic necessities, such as a meeting space with tables and chairs. But public meetings do not require much in the way of equipment or furniture. María Fernanda Cabal recalled one forum that was held on a bus. She and a colleague had been invited to moderate a forum in a remote community in the mountains. The day they arrived, the electricity in the village was out. But there was a bus in town equipped with a closed-circuit television and video system. So the participants climbed on board and proceeded to have a lively public discussion about education. The forum went over very well, Cabal remembered, in no small part because it was some participants' first experience with air-conditioning.

Reading comprehension problems create a unique set of challenges. The UniAndes' team sometimes divides forum participants into small groups and has one person from each, read a section of the issue book. In this way, participants can "work through" each choice as it is presented. Starter videos are also useful in conveying information and increasing understanding of an issue. In general, Cabal said, most participants — even those who cannot read — find the process of open discussion informing and engaging.

Some communities have adapted the deliberative methodology to suit their own needs, often to good effect. For example, in Tubará, a small village in the Atlántico region, local residents used deliberative forums to plan the construction of a cultural center. They adopted the approach after UniAndes organized an initial round of forums on education.

According to Rothlisberger, the process is most effective when communities take it on and make it their own. "Colombia has a very clientelistic political system," she said. "Deliberation is not the way Colombians are accustomed to solving problems." All too often, people resort to arguing and fighting over issues. "So you have to go back and do more forums until people catch on. You have to do it patiently, as many times as possible."

For this reason, she and her colleagues often return to a community several times using different issues. They have found that people comprehend an issue better if they participate in more than one forum on the subject. In some cases, the team will return to a community with a second issue and then, some time later, come back and repeat the first one.

In Manatí, a village in Atlántico, the UniAndes team was invited to organize a series of forums on education over a three-day period. After discussing the issue, the staff asked the participants to identify the community's most pressing problem. Many villagers felt that the main issue was the lack of an adequate water system. They complained that the system in place served less than half the local residents. The group from UniAndes then worked with them to frame the issue and identify a range of practical solutions for discussion. "The message we conveyed to them," said Rothlisberger, "is that when you take a position, it is important to weigh it and think about it so that people can participate in making a decision. You can't just set the problem on a bureaucrat's desk and say, 'Okay, water system, appear!'"

In 1997, UniAndes embarked on a joint venture with the communications department of Universidad Pontificia Bolivariana in Medellín. As the 1997 municipal elections drew near, Murillo, Rothlisberger, and their colleagues were concerned about the rise of voter apathy. They had seen that deliberative dialogue was effective in promoting citizen participation and engagement but, as Murillo put it, "there is a limit to how much you can accomplish with public deliberation in a country of 40 million people."

Meanwhile, the staff at Colombia's largest daily newspaper, *El Tiempo*, was pondering the same question: What can be done to fight voter apathy and strengthen civic engagement? They were familiar with the work of UniAndes and had also participated in Kettering Foundation discussions on civic journalism — a movement in the United States aimed at forging stronger ties between the public and the press. After exploring the problem together, *El Tiempo* and UniAndes adopted a joint plan to engage the public not only in *discussing* key election issues, but in *defining* the issues to be discussed.

As a first step, *El Tiempo* conducted a survey to determine what its readership regarded as the five most-pressing election issues. UniAndes then convened a series of public forums on each issue, inviting citizens to speak out about their concerns and explore possible solutions in the spirit of dialogue and deliberation. The survey and the forums served as the basis for a special preelection series published in *El Tiempo* that offered an in-depth survey of each issue, including facts, analysis, expert opinion, possible remedies, a summary of candidate positions, and photos and quotes from the forums. The series provided not only essential facts and figures but a nuanced picture that reflected where citizens stood after deliberating together and searching for practical solutions.

The initial project with *El Tiempo* later evolved into an innovative collaboration between UniAndes, Universidad Pontificia Bolivariana, and a network of newspapers and radio and TV broadcasters in Colombia. Dubbed *Voces Ciudadanas*, or "Citizen Voices," the effort was aimed at encouraging greater public input and involvement in the political process as well as giving citizens a forum for their views in the news media.

The project was organized around a series of *conversaciones ciudadanas*, or public forums, in which participants came together to deliberate about urgent social and political issues and adopt a civic agenda. A citizens' panel then shared the results with policymakers. The aim of the project was to help shape public policy and to include the voices of ordinary citizens in the national debate.

Ana María Miralles, a professor of journalism at Universidad Pontificia Bolivariana and one of the architects of the project, said that *Voces Ciudadanas* helped strengthen civic participation while at the same time allowing the voices of citizens to be heard and legitimized in a new way. The project created what she called a “public space” where people could participate and “where their ideas could be included in the building of public policy.”

Voces Ciudadanas was regarded by some as a groundbreaking experiment in civic journalism. The project, which has been described at length in journalism periodicals and political and social science reviews, was founded on the notion that the duty of a news organization is not only to faithfully report the events of the day but also to provide a place where shared information can be openly discussed and translated into public action.

Miralles said that while it took its cues from the public journalism movement in the United States, *Voces Ciudadanas* was adapted to the unique political circumstances of Colombia. Its primary goal was not so much to promote civic engagement as to encourage the formation of “a civic agenda,” one that could help influence and orient public policy.

Miralles feels that the American approach to public journalism draws too heavily on the ideas of Jürgen Habermas and other thinkers who see rational discourse and deliberation as the key to informed public opinion. While that may work well in the United States, she said, it assumes high levels of education and engagement on the part of citizens, which simply do not exist in Colombia. Public discourse in the United States tends to hinge on the element of deliberation, whereas in Colombia it revolves around the process of open dialogue.

Murillo and Rothlisberger concurred. This, they said, is why the process has been so well-received in Colombia. Deliberative dialogue allows people to speak about issues that are rarely — sometimes never — discussed in public. It encourages people to come together not only as individuals but as a *public*. As they see it, deliberating together in a communal setting may not be an overtly political act but it has powerful democratic consequences.

It is difficult to estimate the impact of UniAndes work. Civic participation is notoriously difficult to measure and it is only one of many factors that contribute to a healthy civil society. But the university team can be credited with raising public awareness of critical issues facing Colombia and, in some cases, forging lasting ties between citizens and their leaders. More significantly, the work has had an enduring impact on individual forum participants. By providing people with a safe environment in which to share ideas and opinions, UniAndes empowers them to think and act as *citizens*.

Looking back over a decade’s work, Murillo and Rothlisberger summed up their accomplishments in a 1998 article. “Through deliberation,” they wrote, “several objectives have been achieved. People have become aware that, as citizens, they have rights and also duties. Participating in citizen forums has taught many people how to discuss themes of general interest in an orderly way, as equals, without distinctions of status, age, education, class, and position. For many people, this has been the first time they have voiced an opinion, been heard, and allowed to confront agendas that guide political decisions in the community. . . . Public deliberation has demonstrated the real possibilities of solving problems and the importance of people participating in finding their own solutions.”



When Guatemalan government officials, military chiefs, and guerrilla leaders reached a landmark peace agreement in December 1996, they brought an end not only to a protracted and bloody civil war but also a long tradition of military dictatorship. For the people of Guatemala, the accords marked the dawn of a new postwar era and the start of a long and demanding process of reconstruction. “We’re done with the first stage,” then, President Alvaro Arzú declared after signing the peace treaty. “And now comes the hard part. It’s going to be a real challenge.”

Rebuilding a nation after a 36-year civil war would be a challenge even under the best of circumstances. But in a country where the majority of the population is indigenous, where the people speak 20 native languages, and where there is little or no sense of national identity, the task is especially daunting. The peace agreement acknowledged that democracy-building in Guatemala is going to depend not only on regular elections, institutional accountability, and due process, but also widespread civic input and participation. For this reason, the accords established a range of innovative institutions, including *comisiones paritarias* (commissions with representatives of both government and indigenous organizations), *consultas* (direct interchanges between citizens and policymakers), and a *foro de mujeres*, or women’s forum, for training and capacity-building for those who have never had such opportunities.

GUATEMALA

These democratic mechanisms draw inspiration from the work of several pioneering NGOs in Guatemala. One of the more influential is the Guatemala City-based Institute for Political Research and Self-Development (or INIAP, by its Spanish acronym). Founded in 1988, the organization works to strengthen civil society and empower those traditionally marginalized or excluded from public life through a range of civic education programs.

Silencing the rifles was only the first step in achieving peace, observes INIAP director Elfidio Cano del Cid. Safeguarding the peace now requires an ongoing effort on the part of the entire society. What makes it difficult, he says, is that “for the last three decades, people have not been living in a democracy or in political open spaces.” Many Guatemalans “lack the knowledge of how to vote, or why it’s good to vote. They prefer to go to a soccer game, a picnic, or a bar to drink beer.”



This lack of civic participation is compounded by a pervasive mistrust of government. After almost four decades of life under an authoritarian and repressive system, many Guatemalans are reluctant to get involved in public life. “Our most pressing problem today is the illegitimacy of democratic government,” says Jorge Dardon Rodas, an independent political consultant and longtime INIAP associate. “For many years, the state was not oriented toward promoting the public good,” he explains. “It was an instrument of oppression. It is not surprising that people are suspicious of the political process.”

In rural villages, the tradition of working together is still alive and well. Townspeople still meet on street corners and village squares to discuss local issues. Women still gather by the river to discuss problems while doing their laundry together. But issues that extend beyond the community, such as polluted drinking water or dilapidated schools, are perceived by many villagers to be out of their control. They do not perceive the link between the political life of the nation and the day-to-day life of the community. “People in the countryside feel that what happens in Guatemala City doesn’t relate to them,” Dardon says. This is reflected in voter-turnout figures, which are usually higher in mayoral and local congressional races than in national elections.

Cano and Dardon both see public deliberation as a powerful tool in helping to rebuild civil society in Guatemala. The process of dialogue not only engages and empowers people, they say, it educates them about their basic rights and responsibilities as citizens. Cano notes that while Guatemalans are accustomed to deliberating together in families and communities, there is a disconnect between this primary form of deliberation and the sort that occurs in the public square or the village green. “People see two political parties confronting each other at the national level and they discuss it in their families, but not in public.”

In Cano’s view, democracy depends on people being able to talk openly with one another. “The possibility of civil strife starts when citizens don’t engage in such talk with one another,” he says. “The kind of deliberation that we advocate is not café discussions. It’s not therapy.” The difference between idle chatting and deliberation is like the difference between hearing and listening, he says. “Sometimes it is easy just to hear the noises that people make. But the important thing is to really listen to their messages.”

INIAP’s founder, Héctor Rosada Granados — a sociologist, anthropologist, and political scientist best known for his role as lead negotiator of the peace talks — learned about the deliberative method at a meeting of the International Civil Society Exchange (ICSE) in 1992. The following year, Elfidio Cano and Miguel Castillo, then director of INIAP’s political development program, attended a workshop organized by the Kettering Foundation to explore how public deliberation might be adapted in their work.

Inspired by what they learned, Cano and Castillo developed a project aimed at engaging Guatemalan young people around important social and political issues. The rationale for using forums, according to the original project proposal, was that the traditional education system had failed to raise civic awareness and critical thinking about social issues in Guatemala. Talking openly about national problems and how to address them, the proposal said, was the best way to improve Guatemala’s deeply divided political culture.

With funding from the National Endowment for Democracy, the initiative was launched in 1994. More than 1,000 high school seniors participated in a series of 12 forums, each one lasting 2 full days. The students were joined by teachers, administrators and, in some cases, local officials. The goal of the forums was twofold: to educate students about their rights and responsibilities as citizens-to-be, and to raise awareness and critical thinking about poverty, social justice, and other critical issues.

The moderators began each forum by introducing the issue and asking participants to address it from personal experience. After an opening plenary session, the group would then divide into smaller units for in-depth discussion. These small-group sessions were organized around a series of choices or strategies for action, as outlined in issue books prepared by INIAP. After the breakout sessions, the group would reconvene to discuss what they learned and search for common ground.

The project was so successful, Dardon recalls, that INIAP followed it up with a program introducing the deliberative methodology to teachers and educators. “The first year we tried to do everything,” he says. “But it was too much for a small organization like ours. So we changed our focus to teach the methodology to teachers at the high school level. That way they could apply it in the schools.”

This has worked well for INIAP and its network of eleven participating schools. In each case, the organization begins by presenting the school with what Dardon calls a “package of issues” — from poverty and discrimination to interethnic relations and the role of women in society. The school selects an issue, or a combination of issues, to focus on. INIAP then works with teachers and staff to develop exercises and discussions tailored to their individual needs.

According to Dardon, one of the early learning experiences from the project was that deliberation tends to foster not only critical thinking and public awareness in students, but a deeper understanding of their rights and duties as citizens in the making. Because there is such a crucial need for this kind of training, INIAP often works directly with students on framing issues that they themselves deem important, rather than limiting them to a set of preselected issues. In addition, INIAP now puts more emphasis on developing curriculum materials about civic rights and responsibilities.

The result is a unique approach Dardon describes as “a combination of issues forums and civic education classes.” In sessions that typically run five hours, they explore an issue in depth, first in a conventional classroom setting and then in small deliberative discussions. In most cases, they dispense with issue books in favor of handouts and overhead projections. Another method that has worked well, Dardon says, is to have participants dramatize the choices. The process is fun and helps to clarify alternative points of view.

Like the civic education program, INIAP’s community development initiative also puts a premium on public deliberation. Organized in collaboration with the Inter-American Democracy Network, with funding from USAID, the program is aimed at 1) bolstering citizen organizations in Guatemala, El Salvador, Nicaragua, and Honduras; 2) teaching civic values, democratic governance, and responsible citizenship; 3) educating people about their legal and civil rights; and 4) fostering alliances that support and promote democracy in Central America and beyond.

As one of the founding members of the Inter-American Democracy Network, INIAP has played a key role in developing the program and now directs most of its efforts aimed at coordinating activities and offering technical assistance to other organizations in the net-

work. In practical terms, the work involves training forum moderators and convenors, organizing workshops to develop civic education programs, promoting interaction between government, business, and nongovernmental organizations in community decision-making and project planning, and developing mechanisms for greater accountability in government.

One of the benefits of working with other organizations in this way, Dardon says, is that each one brings its own style and methodology to the work. In some cases, the practices of public deliberation have been combined with the principles of *educación popular*, an approach to citizenship-building based on the teachings of Paolo Freire, that emphasizes participation, consciousness, and empowerment. Thanks to the Inter-American Democracy Network, INIAP's work now extends beyond Guatemala's borders. As the organization's influence spreads, the habits of public deliberation are likely to become more widespread and commonplace.

The role of deliberation in Guatemala could be summed up by Zoemia Prado, a former INIAP associate who now directs COSUDER, an NGO working to promote the survival and development of indigenous highland communities. The deliberative method is useful in Guatemala, she says, because "our country is divided and fragmented and we see things from different angles. We have been trying to find points where we agree, but in big points we do not agree. We don't even talk about them. . . . Maybe we don't know how to do it because we have never had the opportunity."



Hungary is generally regarded as the most advanced democracy in Central and Eastern Europe. With a burgeoning economy, an influx of foreign investment, and a cultured and well-educated middle-class, the country is poised to join the European Union in 2004. But the transition to democracy has been a long and painstaking one for the Hungarians. Unlike the “velvet revolution” in Czechoslovakia or the Gdansk shipyard uprising that ushered Solidarity into existence in Poland, Hungary’s process of democratization has been slow and at times barely perceptible. Impatient for reform and frustrated with politics as usual, many Hungarians remain cynical about democracy and hesitant to get involved in public life.

HUNGARY

During the communist era, the people had a love-hate relationship with the government. They distrusted politicians but at the same time expected the government to take care of all their needs. When the state apparatus collapsed in 1989, Hungarians were suddenly faced with a new set of political responsibilities that required working together. Yet many of them were still deeply suspicious of the political process and saw no role for themselves in building democracy from the ground up.

The Joint Eastern Europe Center for Democratic Education and Governance, a Budapest-based NGO, recognized that what Hungarians needed most were opportunities to engage in public life in effective and meaningful ways. Beginning in the early 1990s, the organization took the lead in organizing Civitas Kör, a decentralized, community-based network of educators and civic organizations throughout Hungary working to promote citizen dialogue and deliberation.

According to the Joint Center’s Ferenc Hammer, Civitas Kör began as an experiment. As he wrote in a 1995 report, the project was “an attempt to discover whether the Hungarian public had the insight, tolerance, and political wisdom necessary to justify its oft-cited irritation with the work of elected policy-making bodies.” Beyond that, he said, it was an attempt to promote citizenship education in a constructive and participatory way. “Just as it is impossible to learn how to play football without playing with others, it is impossible to master the skills needed to become a politically responsible and active citizen merely by reading a few books. Real civic learning only occurs in debate with others.”



The rationale for the experiment was summed up by the Joint Center’s Ferenc Zsigó. For democracy to succeed in the long run, he said, its citizens must do more than simply

cast a vote on election day. They have to actively participate in public life by talking and deliberating together. “The political culture of participatory democracy is a culture of deliberation, and mindful deliberation requires an understanding of issues in all their complexity. It requires the capacity to make decisions individually and collectively, and the ability to approach information and opinions with an open, yet critical, mind.”

With funding from the Pew Charitable Trusts, the U.S. Information Agency and other sources, the Joint Center began developing issue books and starter videos on two pressing public issues, unemployment and youth at risk. Once the briefing materials were available, they extended an invitation to a broad range of potential forum organizers and moderators. The result was a two-day training seminar on deliberative dialogue in the city of Sopron at which some 75 participants representing community and neighborhood associations throughout Hungary learned about the nuts and bolts of framing issues, organizing forums, and moderating deliberative dialogues.

In its first year alone, the Civitas Kör network convened more than 50 town meetings on unemployment and youth at risk. The forums succeeded in engaging citizens throughout the country and creating a wide-ranging public debate on the issues. More significantly, they generated interest from other nongovernmental and community groups interested in adapting the methodology in their work.

At one point, Civitas Kör published a newspaper supplement on the unemployment issue in *Magyar Hírlap*, a major national daily. The supplement generated enormous visibility and interest in Civitas Kör. Organizations and individuals that might never have heard of the Joint Center contacted Hammer and his colleagues expressing an interest in their activities. A good number were invited to subsequent training seminars and eventually joined the network.

Civitas Kör also began collaborating with communities and organizations to adapt the deliberative methodology to their own specific needs. The rural town of Szolnok, for example, solicited the network’s help in adapting the issue book on unemployment to its own needs. A public forum was later held in the community. According to the Joint Center’s Eric Weaver, it was the first time such an event had taken place in Szolnok. “The incumbent mayor was the most responsive person in the forum,” Weaver recalled. “I can’t say he was re-elected because of it, but it was probably true.”

Another case involved school teachers who saw an important role for deliberation in the classroom. They felt that the traditional school setting failed to provide students, parents, and teachers with the opportunity to voice their concerns on important public issues — including those related to the school itself. With technical assistance from members of the Civitas Kör network, they organized a deliberative study circle program for their students. The results were very encouraging. Not only were the students more confident and outspoken, but they took a new interest in politics and current affairs. In subsequent talks with the Joint Center, the teachers suggested an issue book on student evaluations and grading in schools. Though skeptical at first, Ferenc Hammer and his colleagues urged them to take the lead in framing the issue and developing the briefing materials. The effort culminated in a valuable teaching resource that was eventually translated into English and made available to educators in the United States.

Throughout the 1990s, the Joint Center continued to look for new ways to enhance cooperation between local governments and civic associations using public deliberation. They worked with organizations and communities on a wide range of issues, including the pros and cons of membership in the European Union, the plight of the Roma (or Gypsy) minority, which still faces widespread discrimination in Hungary, as well as the strained relationship between citizens and government.

One of the most successful initiatives involved a series of deliberative dialogues about housing for young people. After a round of public forums were organized in the city of Székesfehérvár, the results were so promising that 18 municipal governments in other parts of Hungary — including several of the country’s biggest cities — decided to replicate the process as part of a nationwide initiative. The series culminated with a televised forum, held in Budapest, attended by no less than six government officials, including President Árpád Göncz.

“I have always supported forum campaigns because I regard public discussions as very important,” the president stated in his opening remarks. “They provide people with a chance to weigh the pros and cons of an issue and to think together.” The forums presented several promising possibilities, he declared. “First, they will make the youth, their parents, civic organizations, local government, and the business community sit together and share their concerns. Second, they may result in new solutions. Third, they help people think of themselves as citizens, as bearers of rights and responsibilities, on this issue. And fourth, they can establish effective forms of cooperation for the local community.”

The president’s remarks suggest that after more than a decade of democracy, politicians are beginning to recognize the value, perhaps even the necessity, of public discourse and civic participation. The people of Hungary are beginning to embrace this democratic ideal as well. After years of keeping public talk confined to kitchens and living rooms, more and more Hungarians are stepping forward in public to voice their opinions and engage their fellow citizens in dialogue.



When William Miranda-Marín was elected mayor of Caguas, Puerto Rico’s third-largest city, he vowed to make a break with politics as usual and introduce some fresh ideas in city government. Rather than govern for the people, he declared, he would govern with them. One of his first acts as mayor was to establish a Department of Social Development and Community Initiatives — the first of its kind on the island — charged with giving people a direct link to government by teaching them how to identify their own problems, discover solutions, and settle their own differences before bringing issues to the city.

It was a bold and ambitious plan, especially in light of Puerto Rico’s long tradition of political patronage where people abdicate civic responsibility in favor of strong leadership and where leaders in turn ask for little more than a vote every four or six years. The political culture of Puerto Rico reflects its long history of authoritarian rule and political persecution by Spanish and American governors.

PUERTO RICO

As a commonwealth of the United States, Puerto Rico is not a democracy in the strict sense — the island enjoys neither the full benefits of statehood nor the advantages of complete sovereignty. Still, it has many of the attributes of a bona fide democracy, including free elections, democratic institutions, and a burgeoning civil society.

The island’s four million people are citizens of the United States. They use American dollars, are subject to federal laws and the draft, and can live and work in the 50 states. Yet their sensibility and culture remain distinctly Latin American. Nowhere is this more evident than in political life where civic participation is strong and voter turnout regularly reaches 80 percent.



“There is still a communal memory of civic action,” said Ramón Daubón, president for programs at the Inter-American Foundation. “When people come together, they know how to talk. But, unlike other countries in Latin America, Puerto Rico does not have a very strong tradition of working together in communities.” One reason for this is that much of public life is organized around political parties, he

explained. “What is missing is the presence of citizens as central actors. There is a tradition in Puerto Rico of being policy-takers, not policy-makers.”

This fact became clear to Miranda-Marín early in his campaign for mayor. “We had study circles and forums with political leaders, community leaders, professionals, and private sector people,” he told interviewer Alfredo Carrasquillo-Ramírez. “We would ask people, ‘What are

your problems?’ And we would get long lists and pages and pages of problems. Then we would ask, ‘What are your strengths?’ And we would get silence. Everybody would remain silent. Instead of sharing their strengths, they would share stories about what the government brought to the community. And I would think to myself, ‘How much dependency!’”

Miranda-Marín saw that the first step in breaking the cycle of dependency was to introduce a new language for discussing public issues. “The traditional political logic was blunt and simple: ‘I give you my vote in exchange for having you solve this or that, or in exchange for your giving me this or that.’ That discourse had to change.”

He began to refer to himself not as a leader but as an “employee” of Caguas. He asked people about the kinds of collaborative activities they were doing without government assistance. And he helped them identify community resources that they could draw on that didn’t involve government assistance.

“The moment you see yourself as someone who rules over citizens you are dead,” Miranda-Marín asserted. “You have to be careful not to allow people to trust you too much. You are a facilitator hired to do things, but power is and always ought to be in their hands.”

When Miranda-Marín established the Department of Social Development and Community Initiatives, it was with the idea of introducing a collaborative approach to local governance where community leaders would serve as liaisons between government and the people of Caguas. He invited a core group of “social development promoters” made up of educators, social workers, demographers and other professionals to learn about the theory and practice of civic participation. In a weekly series of training sessions, they were taught the nuts and bolts of civic engagement.

In one weekend seminar, representatives of some 50 community-based organizations and NGOs learned how to conduct study circles, convene forums, frame issues, and develop issue books. “I think many people came here expecting to get a list of numbers to call and contacts in the government,” the Department of Social Development and Community Initiatives’ director Mildred Canetti told a reporter after the event. “But what they are walking away with I think is a slightly different mind-set. We broke their expectations of being told what to do.”

CAPEDCOM, a civic organization brought in to lead some of the training workshops, worked closely with the mayor’s office to develop a strategic plan organized around deliberative forums. Founded in 1994, the Association for the Support of Educational and Community Programs (CAPEDCOM, by its Spanish acronym) works with policymakers, academics, religious organizations, trade unions, and other groups to promote democracy.

The organization’s president, María de Lourdes Lara-Hernández, believes that democracy is not so much a set of institutional arrangements as “a way of life” that is embodied in day-to-day activities. In her view, “only experiences at the micro level can teach democracy.” Dialogue and deliberation, therefore, play a key role in building and strengthening civic capacity.

For the members of CAPEDCOM, it is important to provide a neutral middle ground between government and the private sector — especially in a society where more than 35 percent of the workforce is tied to the public sector and some 20 percent work in government or receive benefits from the state.

CAPEDCOM's mission statement stresses that “only direct action on the part of citizens can make a difference.” This idea is embodied in its program work which aims to 1) promote economic collaboration and sustainable development; 2) design civic education programs and curricula; 3) offer research and evaluation services to communities; 4) devise family and community development programs; and 5) offer technical assistance and interagency coordination to other organizations.

According to Alfredo Carrasquillo-Ramírez, associate professor of Graduate Studies at *Universidad del Sagrado Corazón* and former vice president of CAPEDCOM, the organization “provides space for the exchange of knowledge.” In working with the mayor's office, he said, the goal was to explore ideas about how government and civil society organizations could actively collaborate to strengthen Caguas' civic culture.

A former international fellow of the Kettering Foundation, Carrasquillo was well-versed in the principles of deliberative democracy. He was also instrumental in organizing meetings between the foundation and Miranda-Marín and his senior staff. Thanks to these efforts, the National Issues Forums approach has become a crucial part of the city's ongoing community-development work.

Since 1997, more than 200 community dialogues, public forums, town meetings, and training workshops have been held in Caguas on a variety of issues, from crime and drug abuse to waste management and affordable housing. Public deliberation has become, in Carrasquillo's words, “part of the daily life” of Caguas. “A sense of ownership over the achievements of the municipal government has developed among citizens of the different barrios,” he said. “People have begun to see themselves as an integral part of the political equation. It is no longer government doing and providing, but citizens acting hand-in-hand *with* government.”

Public deliberation combined with a new spirit of collaboration has transformed Caguas from one of Puerto Rico's most-troubled cities into one of its most livable. Economic development is on the rise. Caguas' crime rate has dropped significantly and is now lower than many cities half its size. Voluntary activities have increased. And there is now a vibrant network of nonprofit groups and community organizations.

According to Miranda-Marín, the best example of how the city has come together in recent years was the way it responded to the devastation wrought by Hurricane Georges in the fall of 1998. “After Georges,” he recalled, “Caguas was the first city to recover from the impact. In three weeks the city was fully operational. Why? Because people, citizens, everybody got involved.”

Miranda-Marín’s innovative approach has been deemed so effective that his political party recently authorized him to use Caguas as a pilot project in the effort to reevaluate Puerto Rico’s structure of local governance. “The challenge,” Miranda-Marín said, “is to make political leaders understand the way we promote self-sufficiency and not to be fearful about it.”

While some have embraced his ideas, others have found them difficult to understand or accept. “They look at me in a weird way,” he laughed. “They operate and look at politics in a different mode. Unfortunately, they see politicians as promoters of dependency. When they look at Caguas and the process we have gone through, they think I’m *losing* power. They keep citizens trapped and dependent on them. But the power they accumulate is short-lived and the damage they cause is irreparable. My responsibility is to not promote those traps. I see myself as untying knots all the time and making the community stronger in the process. People acknowledge that — and the election results confirm it.”

Public deliberation is making headway not only in Caguas but elsewhere on the island as well. The University of Puerto Rico in Humaco and *Universidad del Sagrado Corazón* in San Juan have both taken the lead in developing curricula and establishing institutes to further the principles of deliberative democracy.

In April 2000, for example, the University of Puerto Rico sponsored a Congress on Community Involvement in Public Policy. The event drew some 300 participants representing a broad cross-section of Puerto Rican society, including policymakers, bankers, academics, community leaders, and civil servants. The discussion revolved around strategies for bridging the divide between citizens and government and emphasized the role that public deliberation can play in allowing communities to design their own development agenda. The participants left the conference with a list of 13 specific recommendations on how to conduct community dialogues and develop partnerships with business and government.

Another organization that has pioneered the use of public deliberation is the Center for Public Policy Research (CIPP). Housed at the Rafael Hernández Colón Foundation Library, an institute roughly equivalent to an American Presidential Library, the organization describes itself as a “public space” for individuals and groups to come together to reflect on pressing social and political issues.

CIPP was founded in 1999 by Rafael Hernández Colón, a four-term governor of Puerto Rico, who saw a need for sustained public dialogue and long-range agenda setting. In his view, election cycles of two or four years mean that policymakers are always focused on short-term gains rather than long-range visions. The goal of CIPP is to invite the public to take part in shaping long-term policy proposals.

One of the center’s most successful efforts to date was a series of deliberative dialogues on journalism and democracy that culminated in a wide-ranging public debate about the role of the Puerto Rican news media. In an initial round of discussions, a select group of academics,

news reporters, and civic leaders explored the issue among themselves. The topic was then opened up to public dialogue and deliberation as a way of highlighting the contrast between expert opinion and the views of the public. “The information that came from that was very rich,” observed CIPP’s Arturo Morales Ramos. “The journalists realized that it was very important to keep talking with people about the issue.”

According to Morales, social and political questions of this nature need to be framed in public terms. “People have to have a sense of ownership of the issue,” he said. For this reason, CIPP is careful not to frame the discussion for people but rather to engage them in a process of mutual learning and discovery. “Instead of bringing an issue to the community, we bring a methodology. We bring them an open question.”

The center has also used this method in a series of dialogues on ethics in government. Academics, intellectuals, business leaders, and public officials have taken up thorny issues like corruption and accountability. “The way it’s structured,” said Carrasquillo, “is not through options but instead through those questions on which there is no agreement. That is the most powerful step of the process because there you get people who don’t know each other or who never have a chance to sit down and talk together. That is very powerful. For example, we had journalists listening to community leaders and hearing things from their perspective in a whole new way.”

According to Carrasquillo, the impulse behind efforts like these is to create new ways to understand public sentiment that go beyond opinion polls and other more traditional measures. “These kinds of mechanisms allow you to introduce new concepts and perspectives into the conversation and bring new questions to the table,” he observed. “It transforms the way people think about issues — or at least the number of things they take into consideration.” Efforts like these, he believes, are a small but significant step toward transforming Puerto Rico’s political culture.



Like other countries of the former Soviet bloc, Romania is still in the throes of a difficult democratic transition. A decade and a half after the fall of communism, the promises of democracy have yet to be fully realized. Many Romanians are still poor and powerless, unemployment remains high, and the government continues to be tainted by corruption, inefficiency, and infighting. The legacy of four decades of dictatorship is especially apparent in public life. While the number of nongovernmental and community-based organizations is growing, the people are still wary of politicians, reluctant to vote, and generally loath to get involved in civic affairs.

ROMANIA

But while democratization has been a slow and painstaking process for the country as a whole, the ideas of self-government and participatory decision making have started to take root, especially at the local level. Thanks in part to the efforts of civic organizations such as the Bucharest-based Pro-Democracy Association, people are taking a more active role in the life of their communities and some local governments are increasingly open to engaging the public in dialogue, deliberation, and even collaborative decision making.

Romania's second-largest city, Brasov, has made citizen participation an integral part of its municipal planning process. Today, public forums are a regular feature of community life and local officials routinely consult with citizen advisory groups and neighborhood councils in the course of making policy. Advisory committees play an especially vital role in city planning by calling attention to pressing issues, establishing priorities, identifying a range of potential solutions, and presenting alternative scenarios to the city council. In 2001, for example, citizens and local officials came together for a series of deliberative dialogues to set priorities and allocate funds for the city's public transportation system.

Focsani, Brasov's smaller neighbor to the east, has embraced a similar approach to local governance based on a high degree of citizen involvement and public deliberation. Like Brasov, Focsani has established an "initiative group" — a team of ordinary citizens — charged with naming and framing critical public issues and presenting them to the local city council. Recognizing the value of this kind of public involvement in city planning, the mayor of Focsani last year went so far as to draft a bill mandating citizen input in local decision making. The ordinance established a series of "dialogue groups" throughout the city — civic, nonpolitical bodies charged with working with the city in an advisory capacity. According to the wording in the bill, the ordinance was designed "to increase the quality and level of civil society involvement in local government activities."



The initiatives in Brasov and Focsani both have their roots in an innovative program called "Dialogue" that is aimed at strengthening relations between citizens and their local governments. Currently administered by *Fundatia Pentru Parteneriat* (Environmental

Partnership Foundation), the program was launched in 1993 by the Pro-Democracy Association in an effort to both promote civic engagement and enlighten elected officials about the value of public participation in municipal planning. With initial funding from the German Marshall Fund and the USAID, the program quickly expanded from two cities to a network of communities throughout Romania.

A robust civil society requires more than just an active citizenry, in the view of Adrian Sorescu, Pro-Democracy Association's executive director. It also depends on elected officials who recognize and respect the need for citizen involvement. "The lack of participation is the result not only of the government's bad performance," he observed, "it is also the result of a gap between the government and the citizen. Officials have no experience dealing with their constituencies." As a result, citizens feel that government is unresponsive to their needs and political leaders lose their sense of accountability. The key, he said, is for citizens and officeholders to work together to develop a common framework for addressing issues.

In the mid-1990s, the Pro-Democracy Association launched a community forums initiative aimed specifically at addressing that need. The program was a departure from the organization's original focus on government accountability and electoral fairness. But according to Sorescu, it was a natural extension of the association's work for two reasons. First, public forums go a long way toward informing citizens about social and political issues and, second, they offer people an entry point into public life.

After conducting a public opinion poll on the most pressing issues facing Romania, the Pro-Democracy Association decided to focus its efforts on street crime. "We chose the issue because we felt it was most approachable," Sorescu recalled. "We wanted people to be involved in the process. People only participate if they feel they can achieve something." Sorescu and his colleagues began by developing a briefing booklet on street crime. Next, they organized workshops in Brasov and Deva to train potential forum organizers and moderators. That was followed up by a series of tightly coordinated and highly publicized forums in ten cities across Romania.

"We had success in getting people involved in the program," said Violeta Bau, a former Pro-Democracy Association staff member who helped organize the effort. "It was hard to get people to participate at first. They refused to talk. They saw no sense in being involved. But once they started to talk, they saw the possibility of changing things. They got the sense of being more powerful by working together."

The forums were effective in bringing a diversity of views to bear on the crime issue. They also allowed citizens to feel a stronger sense of ownership and responsibility for the problem. Still, some participants left the forums uncertain about how to address the issue in a substantive and practical way. "In some cases, people really started to act," Bau recalled. "In other cases, it wasn't so easy. I realized that the forums were not effective on their own, but that it was an important balancing process to include citizens in dialogue."

After the forums, the outcomes were shared with local officials, police departments, civic organizations, and the news media in order to stimulate a national dialogue about street crime. According to Ileana Marin, a Bucharest-based associate of the Kettering Foundation who worked closely with the Pro-Democracy Association in the early 1990s, “a very good and somehow unique relationship was established among citizens, police departments, and mass media. This happened because none of them was accustomed to attending this kind of meeting and, therefore, nobody was really in charge of ‘knowing everything about everything.’”

The Pro-Democracy Association went on to organize a similar forum campaign on “Youth and Politics” aimed at boosting the participation of young people in the political process. Targeted at high schools throughout Romania, the project consisted of several phases: 1) developing a special issue book exploring the disconnection between young people and the political process; 2) organizing workshops to train moderators; 3) holding a series of community forums on the issue; 4) staging a national forum with representatives from around the country; and 5) bringing together policymakers, journalists, and civic leaders to explore the outcomes of the forums and their implications for Romania’s political future.

According to Ileana Marin, efforts like these have worked well in Romania because the country has a long-standing tradition of community dialogue. While most forms of civic participation were wiped out during the communist era, the habit of deliberation survived in tenements’ associations, labor unions, councils of elders, and other places. “To a certain extent,” Marin said, “it is easy to introduce the methodology because people already have the habit of talking together. What we also have to keep in mind is that people like to talk.”

Gheorghe Cretu, director of the Romanian Department of Social Policies, agreed. Before the Second World War, he said, many parts of Romania consisted of “little republics” with strong civic identities and a tradition of public deliberation. In *The Culture of Political Silence*, an issue book designed to stimulate discussion about civic life in Romania, Cretu noted that the habits of democratic thought and practice were deeply rooted by the middle of the twentieth century, particularly in smaller communities. In the Vrancea region, for example, townspeople used to gather in village squares for spirited discussions closely resembling the historic town meetings of New England. “These villages were independent, strong, and rich,” he wrote. And they “had a strong public.”

The key to strengthening Romanian democracy, Cretu said, is to reawaken that indigenous tradition and get people talking again. The first step is to acknowledge the deep skepticism Romanians feel about the political system and to recognize that the process was deeply distorted during the communist era. People must also begin to demand accountability of their political leaders. But ultimately, he stressed, they need to come together as a public and learn to take collective action.

In addition to his position at the Department of Social Policies, Cretu directs the Community Development Center, an NGO working to promote rural development. He has found that deliberative dialogue can be an effective means of empowering people and

forging social bonds. In 2002, he organized a series of forums in a small and depressed agricultural community in the Bacau region in northeastern Romania. Using the deliberative approach, he encouraged the farmers to explore a range of potential development strategies for the community. After meeting three times, the locals decided that their most pressing need was a climate-controlled warehouse where fruits and vegetables could be stored before being shipped to market. After the forums, Cretu helped them apply for a grant and find the technical assistance they needed to build the warehouse. “They came together and figured out what their basic needs were,” he said. “And they created new relationships. Now they are building a store. They have also built some wells and organized a cooperative. It is an achievement.”

Like the Pro-Democracy Association and the Community Development Center, other NGOs have also experimented with the deliberative approach. The Romanian chapter of the Partners Foundation for Local Development, for example, has promoted the use of public deliberation as a way to “work through” the pros and cons of Romanian membership in the European Union. The organization has also adapted the technique of issue framing — identifying a social or political problem and outlining a range of policy options toward dealing with it — to a government-funded program addressing the plight of the Roma (Gypsy) people. Nicoleta Rata, deputy director of Partners Romania, said that while neither of these initiatives involved actual forums in the community, they illustrated that the deliberative method can be a powerful means of identifying problems, clarifying issues, and increasing public awareness and participation.

Cosana Nicolae, who teaches in the English department at the University of Bucharest, has found the deliberative method especially useful in the classroom. She learned about the theory and practice of public deliberation as an International Fellow of the Kettering Foundation in 1998. Upon her return to Romania, she organized two public forums in Bucharest on the participation of women in public life. “Participants were reluctant to speak their minds at first,” she said, “but happy in the end they could express their minds freely.”

Among the most vocal participants in the forum, she discovered, were young people — particularly her English students. When she gave them the English version of the briefing book she had written on the role of women in public life, they insisted on deliberating in English. Apparently, she said, “talking about contentious issues came easier in a foreign language.” In their minds, English represented “the language of democracy and free speech.”

Under the auspices of Gender, an NGO focused on women’s issues, Nicolae also developed issue books on domestic violence and the future of higher education in Romania. These were widely distributed to civic organizations, the news media, and colleges and universities in 2000. They also served as the focus for deliberative dialogues on university campuses. In her view, the process is a powerful way to both inculcate civic values and promote political awareness among young people.

Like Nicolae, Lucian Radu sees an important role for public deliberation in the professional world. A business journalist currently studying at The John Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies in Bologna, he has taken the lead in organizing a series of roundtables where Romanian public officials, news reporters, business people, and opinion leaders can discuss questions like free speech and public accountability. These gatherings are not structured like traditional public forums, with briefing materials and a series of policy options or “choices” to consider. Instead, they are presented as opportunities for dialogue and soul-searching about pressing public issues. According to Radu, deliberation is a more effective approach than discussion or debate because it emphasizes the value of “naming and framing” the issue, not just arguing the merits of different points of view.

Efforts like these represent a small but significant step in strengthening Romania’s democratic culture. When people come together in public to deliberate about pressing issues, they are cultivating what Alexis de Tocqueville called the “habits of the heart” — the essential mores that nurture and sustain a free society. “There is still a bit of passivity among the Romanians,” Ileana Marin acknowledged. “But at the local community level people do get involved and do try to do things. Even though our tradition of talking together was restrained under communism, it has survived. In a few years, I think we will see it take a better form.”



Norilsk is not what one would call a typical Russian city. Surrounded by icy wilderness some 200 miles north of the Arctic Circle, the sprawling mining community is sometimes described as the northernmost city on earth. It is a place of almost perpetual winter where temperatures routinely reach 40 degrees below zero and complete darkness prevails for two months out of the year. There are no roads linking the city to the rest of the country and the nearest metropolis, Krasnoyarsk, is a two-hour flight away. The place is so isolated, in fact, that its 300,000 inhabitants refer to themselves as “islanders,” cut off from the mainland not by sea but by frozen wasteland.

But geography is not the only thing that sets Norilsk apart. The city is experimenting with a deliberative approach to city planning that breaks with not only local tradition but also with political norms in much of the rest of the country as well. Organized around a process called “citizen forums,” the effort is aimed at bringing together city residents, local government, and the town’s principal employer to discuss the community’s future.

The effort is especially significant given Norilsk’s history as a “company town” that once depended on the government for practically everything. The city is the home of Norilsk Nickel, a metals and mining conglomerate that produces large quantities of nickel, copper, and cobalt, and single-handedly accounts for more than 2 percent of Russia’s Gross Domestic Product. Built in the 1930s by prisoners of Stalin’s gulag system, the city was turned into a Communist showpiece during the middle of the twentieth century. Ambitious engineers clamored to work in Norilsk and workers flocked to the city from across the Soviet Union, lured by high wages and special benefits.

The city fared well during the communist era. The buildings were well maintained, the stores well stocked, and the children well educated. The standard of living was among the highest in the Soviet Union. But when the system collapsed, the people of Norilsk suddenly found themselves trapped. The state-owned nickel and copper mines were privatized, the lavish social subsidies dried up, and people were laid off by the thousands. With the shift to a market economy, prices soared and high wages became meaningless. A month’s salary might still be two or three times the Russian average but it was no longer enough to buy a pair of shoes. Finding the money to move back to “the continent” — as the people of Norilsk refer to the rest of Russia — was suddenly out of the question.

As social and economic hard times set in, the future began to look increasingly grim. Among those hardest hit were young people who saw their opportunities vanish. Apathy and alienation were only part of the problem; domestic violence, drug use, and crime took a dramatic upturn. City officials grappled with the issue but it was apparent to everyone that dealing with the problem could not be done without tackling the larger question of Norilsk’s future as a community. As one official put it, “we cannot have a youth policy unless we have a clear strategy for the city’s long-term development.”

RUSSIA



The issue called for communitywide dialogue and deliberation. With the help of the Russian Center for Citizenship Education (RCCE), a St. Petersburg-based NGO, a working group was brought together made up of librarians, journalists, academics, public opinion experts, and civic leaders from Norilsk. Over the course of three days, the team worked closely to develop an issue-framework that could serve as a basis for public dialogue. Several months were then spent researching the issue and interviewing townspeople in order to develop briefing materials for community dialogue.

The forums were held throughout the community. People from all walks of life came together to share their stories, vent their frustrations, and systematically examine various policy options. For the people of Norilsk, discussing public issues openly in this way was a new and empowering experience. While the townspeople were relatively close-knit and accustomed to coming together around common problems, their political instincts were still very reactionist. They were more likely to mount a strike or a demonstration than convene a town meeting.

The habits of democratic citizenship are still taking root in Russia. With the exception of a brief period of parliamentary democracy prior to the 1917 revolution, the people had no experience with democracy prior to the collapse of communism. “People’s views of their ideal relationship with politicians are still highly colored by the Soviet past and by Russian tradition,” says Igor Nagdasev, executive director of RCCE. He finds that two views predominate today — “that people should just leave the professional politicians to their task, and that we should all be good people and get on with our jobs.”

In totalitarian systems like the former Soviet Union, no places were set at the political table for private citizens, and individual interests, in any case, were submerged for the good of the state. Today, a decade after the introduction of a new constitution, citizens’ rights are well established. “Government interference in daily affairs is very weak,” observes Boris Mikhailov of the Institute for U.S.A. and Canada Studies (ISCAN) of the Russian Academy of Sciences. Still, he says, “it takes more than simply a permissive environment to develop a strong civil society. A basic problem in Russia is the lack of consensus on what constitutes a political community — its scope and its membership.”

Victor Borisyyuk, deputy director of ISCAN, agrees. “We are the youngest democracy in the world,” he says. “Because the state controlled every aspect of people’s lives for 70 years, Russians have no experience with individual initiative. They were never meaningfully involved in political life.” The question now is how to help citizens understand that “everything depends not on the Kremlin, not on Big Brother, but on you.”

RCCE hopes that civic forums, like those in Norilsk, can go a long way toward conveying that message. One of the center’s main objectives is to provide basic training in the concepts and skills of active citizenship as well as practical methods of community problem solving. It is especially concerned with reaching out to Russia’s new generation of citizens. According to Nagdasev, today’s young people have a big hand in shaping the future of Russian democracy. “It is so important that they understand this ideal of civic participation. They already think of themselves as owners of their economic life. The next step is to think of themselves as owners of their political life.”

Norilsk is one of six cities involved in a groundbreaking RCCE project aimed at providing avenues for deliberative dialogue between citizens and their local governments. Funded by major grants from the Ford and Mott Foundations, the initiative provides training opportunities for future civic leaders in the arts of democratic dialogue and decision making. The center offers seminars and technical assistance in a variety of areas, including the theory and practice of public deliberation, how to name and frame issues for community dialogue, the basics of focus group research, the process of organizing and publicizing community events, and how to develop networks of information among and between communities.

For the members of RCCE, deliberative dialogue is the critical component. “In a truly democratic nation,” Nagdasev says, “dialogue cannot be limited to the talking and listening that goes on between elected officials and a small group of policy advisors. There must be occasions in which people with quite different views can come together to learn about pressing issues and engage in dialogue about matters of common concern.” Forums are not just an opportunity to talk, he adds, they provide an avenue for arriving at “common conclusions” — conclusions that can both shape public action and influence public policy.

The Russian Center for Citizenship Education is an outgrowth of the Dartmouth Conference, a long-standing series of off-the-record bilateral talks between Soviet and American citizens. In 1991, the conference formed a Task Force on Civil Society cosponsored by ISCAN and the Kettering Foundation. The task force participants shared a sense of urgency about the challenges facing Russian democracy and resolved to develop a civic education program, rather than continue to limit discussions to the narrow circle of people involved in the Dartmouth process.

Formally registered in Moscow in 1993, the center’s mission is to promote the development of civil society in Russia through educational, research, and publishing programs. It brings together an expanding group of organizations already at work in Russian civil society to develop the resources needed for educational and training experiences in citizenship. They include human rights organizations such as the Moscow-Helsinki Watch and the International Research Center for Human Rights; educational institutions such as Center Grazhdanin, Moscow State University, Russian Open University, and Women’s College of Moscow Humanitarian University; Democratic Russia (an association of Russian grassroots organizations) and Democratic Choice (a grassroots citizen group). It also receives support from ISCAN and the U.S. Information Agency.

One of the center’s key affiliates is the Moscow-based Foundation for the Development of Civic Culture, an NGO that, like RCCE, sees public deliberation as vital to a healthy and robust civil society. Since 1996, the foundation has sponsored forum activities in many parts of Russia as well as organized workshops for training civic leaders in the theory and practice of deliberative democracy.

In 1997, the foundation spearheaded a groundbreaking initiative aimed at restoring the role of public libraries as vital centers of community life, places where people can access information, develop new skills, and come together to discuss public issues. In the initial phase of the project, the foundation teamed with the State Library for Foreign Literature in Moscow to train library staff in the theory and practice of deliberative dialogue. The goal was to organize a network of librarians who could not only convene and moderate public forums but also teach the methodology to other community leaders throughout the country.

According to project director Anastasia Kornienko, the last decade and a half has been a difficult one for the Russian library system. Severe budget shortfalls have exacerbated the already difficult job of adjusting to its new role as a democratic institution. “In the past, the library was a place that helped spread the government ideology,” she says. Today, it serves a broader function. “It still helps the community access information. But it can also be seen as a public space where the community can discuss its problems and issues. Having spaces where people can access free information and where they can say anything they want is very important to our democratic development.”

With funding from the Open Society Institute-Russia, an affiliate of the Soros Foundation, the project began by providing training and technical assistance to librarians from six regional libraries throughout Russia. The delegation visited the United States to learn the elements of deliberation, choice work, and issue framing, as well as practical guidance on moderating forums and forming steering committees. Upon their return, the librarians then established Public Policy Centers in five cities — Bryansk, Novosibirsk, Rostov-on-Don, St. Petersburg, and Severodvinsk — charged with introducing other librarians to the practice of framing issues, moderating discussions, and convening forums.

Widely regarded as a prototype for effective community development, the initiative is today being replicated in countries throughout the former Soviet bloc. The goal is both to revitalize public libraries as vital democratic institutions and to create open spaces where citizens can freely congregate, organize activities, explore local issues, and develop practical strategies for public action.

In Bryansk, where the initiative has been particularly successful, “citizen forums” are held regularly on such topics as juvenile delinquency, drug use, AIDS, pollution, and unemployment. The forums are cosponsored by the library and Za Grazhdanskoe Obrazovanie, a nongovernmental organization working to promote civic education in the region. The two organizations also work closely with local news organizations to ensure that the issues are covered by the media.

According to Natalia Lekanova, a senior librarian in Bryansk, the library is perfectly suited to deliberative forums. It is a place where the various parts of the community can come together and connect. The library is “open for everyone,” she says. “It is neutral territory. We are not connected to any political movement. It is the proper atmosphere for discussion. People are more free to discuss issues. Only the library has this atmosphere. Other institutions have activities for particular groups but libraries are for everybody, and people understand this.”

Beyond its community development work, the Foundation for the Development of Civic Culture has explored ways of incorporating public deliberation into university curricula — not just as a theoretical concept but as a valuable method of instruction. Denis Makarov, the foundation’s executive director, believes the theory of deliberative dialogue broadens students’ understanding of political concepts by illustrating the vital role of the citizen in the democratic process. It also has an important role to play as a teaching technique, he says.

In an article in the academic journal *PS: Political Science & Politics*, Makarov and Sheri Frost of Syracuse University described a study they conducted in Moscow, which found that students who engage in deliberative dialogue on public issues emerge with a broader understanding and a more informed opinion than students who are only exposed to subjects through conventional methods of instruction.

“Generally,” they wrote, “participants expressed their political views, sympathies, and preferences with more clarity and sophistication as the forum progressed. We could observe the transformation of naïve and, in some cases, misinformed opinions into enlightened political judgments.” They went on to say that “forums serve a dual purpose.... They provide a framework for developing democratic skills while, at the same time, actively engaging the individual in public issues.”

Over the years, the Foundation for the Development of Civic Culture has worked closely with faculty at the Moscow State Pedagogical University, one of Russia’s most influential educational institutions responsible for training instructors and accrediting courses in more than 80 different teaching colleges around the country. The research on deliberation has been so promising, Makarov says, that the university recently issued a formal resolution calling for the translation of educational materials on public deliberation as well as the design of a specialized training program for political science faculty.

The Russian Center for Citizenship Education has also focused much of its work on curriculum development involving the deliberative methodology. Teachers are a natural focus for the center, RCCE’s Tim Fedorenko explains, “because to build a civil society, we need to promote the acquiring of political attitudes in the high schools.” Teachers who use the deliberative methodology can help students develop not only critical-thinking skills, he says, but also democratic values and habits of the mind.

Russia’s Open University has used the methodology for several years, applying it to both political discussions and research. “It is quite applicable to the educational process and our students absorb this methodology easily,” says Marina Vishniakova, one of RCCE’s faculty team members. The challenge, she says, is to adapt it to the Russian way of thinking. “Russians are more conflict oriented. They don’t see compromise as something they really need. And, of course, very often our debates do not come to some practical result.”

Alissa Fomina, RCCE’s project coordinator, agrees. “There is a lack of skills and habits of public participation and initiative,” she says. Russians’ long experience with authoritarianism has deprived them of the skills of public dialogue. But by giving high school students and future educators exposure to the practice of deliberative inquiry, she says, they can help sow the seeds of a more public-minded and civically engaged culture.

While the curriculum work plays an important role in RCCE's ongoing efforts to promote citizenship, the center's primary focus remains its work in the field. For more than a decade, the organization has held forums and training institutes in communities throughout Russia. It has also published issue books to promote dialogue on a range of important issues, including poverty, the environmental crisis, the future of the Russian military, the role of women in the new economy, and the disconnection between people and government.

RCCE and the Foundation for the Development of Civic Culture recently teamed up in an ambitious new project aimed at bringing the voices of citizens to bear on U.S.-Russian relations. Teams representing both organizations — one in Moscow and the other in St. Petersburg — jointly framed the issue, conducted interviews, and developed a 28-page issue book entitled, *Russians Deliberating on America*.

When the book was done, the two teams began moving around the country organizing and moderating forums on the issue. In 2001-2002, about 100 forums were held in 15 Russian provinces. The forum sites were picked with geographic considerations in mind in order to cover the majority of regions in the country. The team members focused their efforts on regions where the political and social environment is particularly entangled, such as Vladivostok and Kazan (Tartar Autonomous Republic). Special attention was paid to Central Russia and the Volga River region, considered core Russian provinces.

What gives special significance to the project is that while people across Russia were deliberating about the issue, members of the National Issues Forums network in the United States held mirror-image forums on the same topic. People in both nations were engaged in a process of soul-searching and reflection about the future of Russia-U.S. relations. The goal of the initiative is to help break down long-standing stereotypes on both sides about the two nations. According to the project team, public deliberation is essential in overcoming the limited vision created by the media and by Russia's ideological heritage.

While the project has been an important point of focus for RCCE over the last two or three years, the center generally avoids working on broad, national issues. After 70 years of Communist rule, Igor Nagdasev says, it is difficult to discuss issues in national terms. People are highly suspicious of anything that gives the impression of state propaganda. Besides, many Russians have lost faith in government and would rather take matters into their own hands than leave them to politicians. "In our work in the provinces," he adds, "it's becoming clear that people count on *themselves* more than on the state or local government. It's not a total change, but there are some signs that this is happening."

The center has responded to this need by assisting communities in applying deliberative dialogue to local problem solving. Issues have ranged from housing reform in Novokuznetsk to pollution in Briansk to school policy in Rostov-on-Don. Forum moderators sometimes have to work hard to maintain a deliberative dialogue, Nagdasev says, because people tend to get emotional and irrational when the issues are very important to them. "It's a much more personal conversation. They are talking more about each other in the situation, rather than on the situation itself."

Another challenge, says Marina Vishniakova, is showing forum participants that they can make decisions and solve problems without help from outside authorities. “The community can solve problems on its own,” she says. “But it’s not common for Russians to understand that the community can find real solutions.”

In Norilsk, citizen forums have helped the city address some of the problems of young people. As a direct result of the forums, the local government has established a department to serve youth at risk. More significantly, perhaps, the forums have allowed the community to come together and engage in a constructive dialogue about the future.

Since the first forums were held in Norilsk, the city has started to rebound. As one news story put it, “the city of Norilsk is a phenomenon of Russia’s far north. Its streets, incongruously lined with houses evoking St. Petersburg’s stuccoed allure, stuck in a fog of snow and pollution, have begun to look colorful again. . . . Local residents, the city administration, and its local officials have begun to dream again.” The changes can be attributed in large part to the economic turnaround of Norilsk Nickel, the mining conglomerate. But it’s safe to say that the practice of public deliberation has also had a hand in restoring the city’s sense of hope and possibility.



“We need a vibrant network and range of civil society activities and organs if we are to permanently cement the foundations of our democracy,” former South African President Nelson Mandela declared in April 2001. “It is in fact one of the major contributions that we can make to civil society by encouraging and strengthening debate at all levels, putting our points of view vigorously and with confidence.”

Speaking at the National Civil Society Conference outside Johannesburg — an event that brought together civic and political leaders from throughout South Africa — Mandela called on his countrymen to engage in dialogue and make their voices heard. During the anti-apartheid struggle, he said, “we established the tradition of talking through important national issues.” The challenge today is to strengthen that tradition and apply it toward solving the country’s urgent social and economic troubles.

SOUTH AFRICA

Few NGOs have championed that ideal more vigorously than Idasa, a public interest organization committed to building civic capacity, advocating social justice, and strengthening democratic institutions. Headquartered in Pretoria with a research and broadcast division in Cape Town, Idasa is among the most prominent NGOs in South Africa today with a staff of 125 and an annual budget of nearly \$15 million.

The organization was founded in 1986 by Frederick Van Zyl Slabbert and Alex Boraine, two government officials who stunned the political establishment in the mid-1980s by resigning from parliament because it had, in their view, become irrelevant and out of touch with the needs of the people. After forming Idasa (originally an acronym for Institute for a Democratic Alternative for South Africa), the two began working against the government, facilitating meetings between members of then-banned political organizations and prominent white South Africans. One such meeting was the historic 1997 conference in Dakar, Senegal, that brought together Afrikaners and exiled members of the African National Congress.



Since the unbanning of political organizations in 1990 and democratic elections in 1994, the focus of Idasa’s work has shifted to the creation of a democratic culture in South Africa and strategic interventions to help, as Mandela put it, “cement the foundations of democracy.” “At Idasa, we have spent many years bringing groups together to talk,” says Ivor Jenkins, director of Idasa’s Kutlwanong Democracy Centre in Pretoria. “Initially, all we did was bring together diverse communities — national, provincial, and local — to sit and talk. We saw ourselves as a facilitator of discussions, of meetings, and of processes. But today, we are more focused on training, monitoring, advocacy, and research.”

The organization operates six national programs covering a broad range of activities, including a Parliamentary Information and Monitoring Service, a Budget Information Service, and a Public Opinion Service that collects, analyzes, and disseminates public opinion survey data on current public issues and perceptions of democratic performance. It's Local Government Centre is engaged in an array of projects involving civic training and capacity-building. The goal of the program is to bridge the gap between local officials, or councilors, and the community, as well as to promote public leadership and civic engagement.

Ivor Jenkins stresses the importance of working directly with citizens and promoting their sense of self-respect. "There has to be an acknowledgement and a realization that 'I am an equal,' and 'I can make decisions,' and 'I can participate in the political process,'" he explains. "People don't understand how severely apartheid dehumanized a huge portion of society. Many South Africans came to accept in their own being that they were nothing more than workers, that they didn't have the capacity to think or to challenge authority. People's human rights and their dignity were taken away. So every day we stress the importance of capacity, capacity, capacity, in our work. That's what we try to transfer."

Initially, much of the work was aimed at what Marie Ström, manager of Idasa's Citizen Leadership Project, calls "community-based educators." "We started with very basic training about the constitution, about history, and about how we wanted our society to look so that people could appreciate how valuable the new democracy was and at what cost it had been won," Ström says. "Then we moved into a period when we looked more closely at human rights, access to information, administrative justice, and the relationship between citizens and government — not just how laws are made, but how people need to listen and talk to one another. The more we did that work in the field, the more we wished that we could not just give people knowledge but help to build skills. What we want to rediscover and redevelop is democratic leadership in the community that gets people talking again in the way they did before the apartheid government fell."

Idasa's staff believe that creating space for people to talk together and speak out on issues is critical to building a sustainable democracy in South Africa. "The initial excitement and jubilation that marked the beginning of the transformation process is all but forgotten today," says Mpho Putu, manager of Idasa's Community Participation Unit. "In workshops, when asked to express their views on the state of affairs in South Africa, citizens talk about increasing unemployment, poverty, and the perceived inability of the government to 'get things right.' It seems to me that people want to talk, but there is no real platform created for them to raise issues close to their heart."

According to Putu, there is an important role for deliberative dialogue in helping to channel people's hopes and frustrations into effective political action. The challenge, he says, is "to create a situation where ordinary citizens can constructively deliberate about these issues and find solutions for their own problems." That means not just imparting knowledge, he says, but actively engaging citizens in public work.

Marie Ström agrees. "You educate people about democracy not just by talking about it but by doing things," she says. "The work itself is educational. But it can only happen when we exercise our civic identities and begin to work across political and racial boundaries."

The habit of coming together to deliberate is hardly foreign to South Africans. During the antiapartheid struggle, public discourse came quite naturally to people. But according to Jenkins, it often stopped short of the sort of deliberation aimed at exploring practical strategies for public action. “The concept of deliberation that will contribute to the public good — where choices are better defined and options are more carefully considered — needs more thought among those already talking so actively,” he says.

Idasa has used deliberative dialogue in multiple settings and toward a variety of ends. In 1999, the institute sponsored a series of public forums tackling the problem of illegal immigration. It is a vexing issue for many South Africans in the postapartheid era. New democratic freedoms and economic opportunities have lured hundreds of thousands of immigrants from central and southern Africa. As crime rates have escalated, poverty and disease have spread, and unemployment rates have risen to record levels, many South Africans, particularly in major urban areas, are pointing the finger at illegal immigrants.

Using data from its national research program, Idasa formed a committee to frame the issue and develop a discussion guide entitled *To Whom Does South Africa Belong?* Once the issue book was tested and finalized, the planning group launched it with a forum in the community of Sunnyside in Pretoria’s inner city. The gathering drew about 50 people, a diverse group consisting mainly of local residents and business owners, both male and female, young and old, but also a handful of immigrants.

The group valued the opportunity to explore such a pressing issue for an extended period of time, according to Ivor Jenkins who moderated the forum. Despite some initial skepticism about the format, the participants quickly warmed to the process of letting “non-experts” discuss the immigration dilemma, Jenkins says. The first forum not only laid the foundation for more deliberative discussions on illegal immigration but also for tackling other equally pressing public issues.

Idasa has also used deliberative dialogue as a basis for rethinking community policing strategies in South Africa. The issue is a delicate one in a nation where the police force was once seen as the strong arm of a repressive state. Resources for law enforcement were mostly allocated to whites-only areas and the management of the police system was almost entirely white. Even today, a decade after the end of apartheid, many blacks still have vivid memories of police brutality and political repression, and among whites the police are still widely regarded as incompetent and inefficient.

Following the first free elections in 1994, the government launched a series of national initiatives to transform the South African Police Service. But the question remained, How could local communities ensure greater accountability from the people who police them? To explore that question, Idasa established the Community Police Forums, a national program aimed at promoting accountability and cooperation between communities and their law enforcement agencies.

The initiative was launched in the city of Ficksburg in the Eastern Highlands. According to Nico Bezuidenhout, senior coordinator of Idasa’s Community Safety Unit, the Ficksburg forums illustrate how deliberation among a wide array of stakeholders can

bring about real change and effectively address problems in the community. “The founding meeting of the Community Police Forum was probably a watershed for this town,” Bezuidenhout reports. “Not only did farmers attend, but also farm laborers and different representatives from both the African township and the former white town. This event was significant in itself because for the first time people who never had a voice before, and for whom democracy had not materialized beyond the right to vote, had the opportunity to take part in shaping the future of their community. Another first was that the police actually said they valued the opportunity to gain input from the community.”

The police took the initiative in establishing the forum because the law mandated community input. Yet their commitment to the process indicated that something else was at stake. They were well aware that they were distrusted by most of the community and that the new political order would require them to broaden their service to all sections of the community. The forum was, therefore, seen as a way to gain legitimacy in the eyes of the community and to enlist people’s support and cooperation.

Despite some initial doubts about the police’s intentions, the community also embraced the process. The local townspeople saw it as an opportunity to influence law enforcement policy, demand better service and, not least, to point out abuses of power on the part of police officers. Not all of their hopes were realized, but the forum helped to forge a new and productive relationship between the community and the police, one based on cooperation and joint problem solving.

The forums have had a dramatic effect in Ficksburg. According to Bezuidenhout, members of the local police force report that improved communication has definitely influenced the style of policing and made the department more responsive to the needs of the community. In their view, the process has also contributed to “an immense attitude shift toward the police.” While there is still much to be done, people are on the whole more positive, and “there is a greater acceptance of cultural and religious diversity in the community as a result of interaction in the forum.”

Similar forums have been held in other parts of South Africa, as well. In 2003, Idasa organized deliberative dialogues on the police issue in Soweto, Johannesburg’s twin city that is populated exclusively by blacks. It was in Soweto that much of the struggle against apartheid was fought. The 1976 riots, which spread through the country, started in Soweto with black children protesting against Afrikaans being used as a joint instruction medium with English in African schools. As the demonstrations increased in size, the police threw tear gas canisters into the crowd. The ensuing wave of panic, stone-throwing, and shooting into the crowd by the police is still vividly remembered by many residents of Soweto.

According to Enough Sishi, a senior researcher in Idasa’s Municipal Safety Unit, the 26 townships that make up Soweto are an ideal place to explore issues of law enforcement and public safety. “Policing is one of those issues that has not been dealt with properly,” he says. “When the new government was created, there was an effort to transform the South African Police Service and make its first priority safety and security. But because of the past, when safety and security were the domain of national intelligence — the police, the army, the military forces — there was no participation and no input from people in the community.”

Sishi hopes that the forums, and a newly developed issue book on community policing, can begin to change that. “I think the most interesting views on this issue come from the public,” he says. “If we use the deliberative format — where the community participates in naming and framing the problem and then talking about it — just maybe we can come up with solutions.”

While deliberative forums of this type have been successfully incorporated into a number of Idasa’s programs, the staff are quick to point out that this sort of dialogue must be part of a broader strategy of “building the people.” This is especially true in less-developed communities where people are still struggling to meet their most basic needs. “In a nonurban or rural area, the deliberative methodology and the choice work approach is too flashy,” Jenkins observes. “It’s above the heads of people. Even if you bring it down to simple terms, people struggle to understand why they should be talking and choosing certain things they cannot have any impact in pushing forward.”

Enough Sishi echoes the point. “Because people are so used to being pushed around and told what to do, they are very suspicious of anyone coming in with a preplanned ‘process,’” he says. “That is a problem that the deliberative approach has all over the world, but in South Africa it is especially difficult. I think it has to do with the history. People are tired. They want a break and want to do their own thing, their own way.”

The other problem, Sishi adds, is that South Africa still has not developed what he calls “a culture of talking.” In the United States and Europe, people will gladly talk for hours on practically any subject, he says. “But not in South Africa. People don’t want to talk just for the sake of talking. And because they haven’t been given much of a role in decision making, they tend to back off a lot. They don’t like to participate. If you are planning a forum, they may even stop you before you do it and say: ‘Before we do this thing, where is it going to lead?’” For this reason, he believes that deliberative dialogue is best suited to the educated middle class. “If you go to Johannesburg or Cape Town, then it’s fine. You can get them to go through choices and weigh tradeoffs and so on. But it’s harder when you get out of the cities.”

In its work with smaller rural communities, Idasa has incorporated some elements of deliberative dialogue. But, as Jenkins points out, the staff tends to use dialogue as just one part of a broader strategy of capacity-building and leadership training. For example, Idasa’s Community Participation Unit has worked closely with the four towns that make up Highlands, a municipality in the Mpumalanga province. In each of the black townships, Idasa selected a community facilitator, or moderator — a person within the community with a talent for organizing people and promoting dialogue and learning. Each facilitator was offered a small stipend and given an intensive two-week training course in community leadership at Idasa’s main offices in Pretoria. Upon their return to the townships, the facilitators were asked to hold weekly meetings with a carefully selected group of 15 to 20 people to talk about community needs.

Idasa calls this approach to leadership-building, “Reflect.” “We use literacy training as the vehicle to help people express their problems or needs,” Jenkins says. In the case of Highlands, it has worked remarkably well. “The community facilitators established their groups and started holding meetings. Even today, they continue to meet once a week for about four to six hours to get literacy training and talk about community development issues. As they learn to read and write, they also develop community citizenship skills.”

“The theory behind Reflect,” Jenkins says, “is that you have to have a certain confidence, a certain authority, a certain community-backing before you can really take steps to change the community. The people in these townships are not necessarily community leaders, but they are starting, as a group, to represent their community’s real needs and desires.”

Highlands illustrates how Idasa has “reinterpreted or redesigned” the deliberative methodology to suit South Africa’s unique circumstances today, Jenkins says. It is but one example of how the organization is rising to Mandela’s challenge of “encouraging and strengthening debate” and helping South Africans, at every level of society, express their points of view with vigor and confidence.



Tajikistan is a nation in the throes of profound social and political change. The small, mountainous country of 6.2 million people gained independence in 1991 following the breakup of the Soviet Union. But postindependence politics were beset by a host of clan rivalries and regional disputes that soon erupted into a bloody civil war. The fighting continued for five years, costing the lives of tens of thousands of Tajiks and devastating the nation's already weak economy.

In a country once supported almost entirely by the Soviet government, building a democracy has been a formidable challenge. Tajikistan held its first free presidential elections in November 1994, and its first parliamentary elections two months later. While peacefully conducted, there were many observations of election fraud and intimidation. The nation also adopted a new constitution in 1994. While not a perfect document, it is still judged to be a significant improvement over the Soviet-era version.

TAJIKISTAN

Once the political situation stabilized, it became clear that much of the work of rebuilding Tajikistan could only be done by the people. The government could not afford to provide even the most basic of services like water, gas, and electricity, let alone address broad social issues like public health, education, and the defense of human rights. As a result, community-based organizations sprung up around the country to fill the need. Some were informal community councils and neighborhood associations, others were more formal NGOs.

Until the collapse of communism, the idea that organizations could operate independently of the state was a foreign concept. But over the last decade as many as 1,000 NGOs have come into existence to address such needs as conflict resolution, women's rights, and environmental protection. Among the more prominent NGOs is the Tajikistan Center for Civic Education (TCCE), a Dushanbe-based organization working to advance civil society and foster democratic values.



“We try to show people what democracy means,” says Gulchera Nosirova, the center’s founder and president. “People had very mixed-up ideas about what democracy was during the civil war.” It didn’t help that the militant Islamic rebels who were largely to blame for the civil war called themselves “democrats,” she explains. Tajiks also remember well when political activity was regarded a threat to the government. A decade after the collapse of communism, many Tajiks are still reluctant to get involved in public life.

TCCE's Rasoul Rakhimov believes that the first step in building civil society in Tajikistan involves creating a sense of community where people are encouraged to participate. "The idea is to get people talking," he says. "Once they come together to discuss things, they can begin to do things together."

The center has promoted deliberative forums as a way to stimulate constructive, nonconfrontational dialogues about public issues. Deliberation is an especially effective method for doing that, Nosirova and Rakhimov point out, because it builds on long-standing cultural traditions.

In Tajikistan, as in other Central Asian countries, communities have historically been organized around influential village councils — known as *mahalla* or *guzar* — that, like town meetings, provide a forum for people to discuss local issues. During the communist era, the state tried to systematically eliminate these councils. But the practice survived in the form of "teahouse" ceremonies, where the local elders would gather in private to discuss family, neighborhood, and village issues.

The "teahouse" is still a vibrant feature of community life in Tajikistan, says Nosirova. "We are trying to use teahouses as forums for deliberation because it is a way of engaging people in public issues." While it is less exclusive and paternalistic than it used to be, it is still limited to men, she says. "Part of the work we are doing is trying to involve more women in active life."

Another custom that survived the communist era revolves around younger adults — usually between the ages of 25 and 40 — who gather in each other's homes on a rotating basis to socialize and discuss important community issues. "They talk about their problems and how they can help each other," Rakhimov says. "It's a way of offering friendship and support." By adapting deliberative forums to cultural practices such as these, the center's programs allow people to bridge the gap between their public and private lives.

Nosirova insists that building a stable and secure democracy cannot be accomplished by officials alone. Grassroots organizations — particularly those working directly with citizens at the community level — are critical to the work of democracy-building. When she founded the center in 1995, her goal was to create a boundary-spanning institution that could strengthen the relationship between citizens and government.

The center was an outgrowth of a long-standing series of citizens' discussions tracing back to the height of the Cold War. In October 1960, Dartmouth College in the United States hosted the first of what turned out to be the longest continuous bilateral dialogue between citizens of the Soviet Union (later Russia) and the United States. In 1981, the participants of the dialogue — which came to be known as the Dartmouth Conference — resolved to create a special task force aimed at understanding and addressing regional conflicts. When the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991, the task force turned its attention to one of the most critical of these regional conflicts — the civil war in Tajikistan.

After the war erupted, Russian members of the task force visited Tajikistan and spoke with more than 100 individuals, representing a cross-section of political and professional backgrounds, about the possibility of replicating a Dartmouth-style dialogue on a smaller scale within the country. A handful of participants were then selected to take part in what was formally called the Inter-Tajik Dialogue within the framework of the Dartmouth Conference.

Like their counterparts in the Dartmouth talks, the participants of the Inter-Tajik Dialogue promised to speak in their capacity as individuals, not as representatives of organizations or political factions. They also vowed to listen to each other carefully and with respect and to honor the integrity and sensitivities of the other participants. In addition, they agreed early on, as had participants in the Dartmouth Conference, that they would discreetly inform key figures in government and elsewhere of their experiences in the dialogue. In this way, the Tajik leadership could learn about the existence and the progress of the dialogues without having to be involved or responsible for its outcomes.

Although the civil war served as the primary focus of the Inter-Tajik Dialogue for the first few years, the goal was not so much to address a single problem or issue as to develop a way to talk, think, and work together in new ways. Given that the participants represented a wide range of political and regional interests — many of which were pitted against each other in the civil war — just getting people to talk together was a daunting challenge. When the participants sat down together for the first time, the tension and animosity in the room was palpable — they could scarcely look at each other face-to-face.

Over the course of 35 meetings spanning almost 10 years, the talks have evolved into a sustained and highly productive dialogue that the participants describe as “a mind at work in the midst of a country making itself.” Not only have the participants developed a mutual respect and liking for one another, but the process has had a formative impact on a wide range of developments in Tajikistan. Chief among them was a series of peace agreements that was formalized in the presence of Russian President Boris Yeltsin at the end of June 1997, bringing an end to the civil war.

In recent years, the participants have turned their attention to the “post-accord phase.” Their main focus has been how to replicate the process of sustained dialogue in key places throughout Tajikistan as its people try to turn a formal peace agreement into a peaceful country. An essential part of making that happen, they feel, involves shifting the dialogue from government officials, academics, journalists, civic leaders and other elites to the ranks of ordinary citizens. As they see it, the only way to make the peace process sustainable in the long run is to ensure that it is open, inclusive, and participatory.

To that end, the participants formally registered an NGO — the Public Committee for Democratic Processes — in February 2000. Headquartered in Dushanbe, the committee is charged with implementing the recommendations of the Inter-Tajik Dialogue group — of moving, as committee director Parviz Mullojanov puts it, “from dialogue to action.” Among

the committee's ongoing projects is the creation of a second sustained dialogue within Tajikistan, a series of pilot projects aimed at fostering economic development through building and strengthening social networks and, under an agreement with the Ministry of Education, a project with professors from nine universities to develop courses, programs, readings, and a textbook in "resolving conflict and building civil society."

In addition, the committee has taken the lead in promoting citizen-based dialogue and deliberation throughout the country. While the peace accords brought an end to the civil war, members of the committee insist that the treaty failed to address one of the primary causes of the conflict — the lack of opportunities for people living in different regions of Tajikistan to actively participate in the decision-making process. They are free to vote in presidential and parliamentary elections, to be sure, but there are still very few mechanisms in place that give citizens a role in shaping the public debate.

In collaboration with the Tajikistan Center for Civic Education, the committee established the Tajik Issues Forums in 2001 as a modest attempt to open up political space for civic input and engagement. The program began with a training seminar for civic leaders interested in organizing and moderating forums in their communities. Three issues were selected for the first round of forums — education, poverty, and drug trafficking. Briefing booklets were developed and then distributed throughout the network.

Over a period of 18 months, nearly 100 deliberative forums were held in 14 communities throughout Tajikistan. Some 1,800 people participated in the forums, including teachers, doctors, journalists, businessmen, members of parliament, local officials, student activists, pensioners, widows, and war veterans.

By almost any measure, the first round of Tajikistan Issues Forums was a remarkable success. According to a report issued by the committee in the spring of 2003, the forums were an important step in shifting out of the "old Soviet mentality" that still pervades Tajikistan's political culture. During the communist era, it states, "people's initiatives were suppressed by the state and citizens came to rely only on official bodies. But in the course of the discussions [participants] gradually started to understand that this is a time when they don't have to expect assistance from outside." The report went on to say that "participants' belief in their own capacities increased: "In some of the communities, people decided to move from the discussion phase to public action and to try to improve the situation in their own village or town by relying on local resources."

In the city of Külöb, a large school was completely renovated as the result of a community forum on education. The building had been an eyesore, a vivid reminder of political neglect, chronic budget cuts, and neighborhood blight. The school had not been repaired since it was built in the 1950s. Doors were missing, desks and chairs were falling to pieces, and there was not a single unbroken window in the building. After discussing the situation

in a forum, the participants wrote a forceful letter to the city administration and followed it up by visits to city hall. The initiative paid off: local officials were able to secure a grant from a U.S. foundation to completely refurbish the building. In the words of the forum moderator, “We believe that the forum participants were able to build a bridge of mutual understanding between the local government and the people in the community.”

A similar outcome was reported in the village of Nimich after a forum on education. As people deliberated about the problems facing the local school, it became clear that what the village lacked were qualified women teachers. After the forum, several participants discussed the issue with local officials. The talks were unusually productive. In short order, a new program at the school was created allowing the best female students to assume the role of interim teachers. At the same time, they were enrolled in the local teacher’s college. In retrospect, the moderator of the Nimich dialogues noted that “without our forums these young people’s problems would still remain unsolved.”



Examples such as these suggest that deliberative forums, at their best, are more than simply occasions for citizens to talk to each other. They can also serve as essential preludes to public action and community organizing. For citizen organizations in Tajikistan, the challenge in coming years will be to create institutions and spaces where this kind of public talk can occur more often and more freely.

GLOSSARY

The following terms are used in describing programs in the various countries implementing the public deliberation methodology.



INTERNATIONAL CIVIL SOCIETY CONSORTIUM FOR PUBLIC DELIBERATION

A group of nonpartisan, nongovernmental organizations from Latin America, Europe, the U.S., and the Middle East whose common mission is education of a responsible and competent citizenry. The group was formed in 1995.

DELIBERATION

Careful weighing of the possible consequences of various approaches to a problem against all that people consider valuable.

ISSUE FRAMING

A process in which groups frame an issue for public deliberation by sorting out the values underlying different views of the issue and identifying at least three major approaches to be made in taking action on it.

NATIONAL ISSUES FORUMS (NIF)

A nationwide network of locally sponsored forums and study circles for the discussion of public issues. The network of local institutions that convened forums was known as the Domestic Policy Association (DPA) until 1989.



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