NCDD Project Report to the Kettering Foundation:

Views of NCDD 2008 Conference Participants on Democratic Governance and Two of our Field's Greatest Challenges

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Overview of the Report

For this research project with the Kettering Foundation, the National Coalition for Dialogue & Deliberation (NCDD) explored how attendees at the October 2008 NCDD conference in Austin, Texas view citizens' role in democratic governance and how they see *themselves* or *their work* impacting the role citizens play in democratic governance. Furthermore, we examined attendees' views on how best to address each of the five "challenge areas" we focused on at the conference, specifically asking them for ideas for making progress on the "Systems Challenge" (embedding public engagement in government and other systems) and the "Action & Change Challenge" (strengthening the link between public engagement, citizen action, and policy change).

Information and opinions were gathered from our respondents in numerous ways:

- online dialogue process held before the conference at CivicEvolution.org
- interviews at the conference conducted by attendees
- information gleaned from workshops, plenary sessions and discussions at the conference
- reports from our conference "challenge leaders"
- an online survey and phone interviews conducted by Sandy Heierbacher after the conference

Most of our 88 respondents are community-based and university-based practitioners of dialogue and deliberation programs. All had attended the 2008 National Conference on Dialogue & Deliberation held in Austin, Texas.

This paper represents a snapshot of a specific time in this rapidly growing, maturing field of practice. An exciting time, when process leaders and networks in our field are being brought into discussions about federal policy, and when our field is exploring how and whether it fits into a broader "democracy reform" movement. It's also a time in which we're seeing clear shifts in approach in the field. Practitioners, organizations and institutions are starting to think in terms of capacity building and find ways to demonstrate perceptible shifts in civic capacity. Practitioners are focusing more on developing ongoing relationships with institutions, decision-makers and other power-holders in the communities they serve. And people are becoming more and more adept at using multiple models, combining elements of different models, and designing unique processes to fit different contexts.

About the Author

The author of this report, Sandy Heierbacher, is the Director of the National Coalition for Dialogue & Deliberation (NCDD) and its conferences. She serves as the hub of a 1200-member network of organizations, practitioners, and scholars on the leading edge of the fields of intergroup relations, deliberative democracy, conflict resolution, community building and organizational development.

Summary of our Findings
Here is a quick look at the topics that are explored in the report in more depth.

What is citizens' role in democratic governance?

When asked how they would describe "the role citizens play in democratic governance," people responded in five distinct ways. Some took a positive stance, outlining citizens' critically important role in governance. Others took a pragmatic stance, recognizing that the role of citizens varies depending on a variety of factors. Others responded soberly about the very limited role citizens have

in government. Many expressed why they felt the role citizens currently play is far from where it should be. And several outlined what citizens' role *should ideally* be in governance.

In addition to these five categories of responses, a number of people pointed out that *ensuring citizens play a significant role in democratic governance is what our work in dialogue, deliberation and public engagement is all about.* Much of the work of those who attended the 2008 NCDD conference focuses on broadening citizens' role by inviting greater participation in public discussions about critical issues.

Types of goals/impacts of dialogue and deliberation

What do respondents mean when they refer to the "action and change" that results from dialogue and deliberation efforts?

When asked how their work impacts citizens' role in democratic governance, most respondents mentioned impacts that fall clearly into at least one of the categories in the Goals of Dialogue & Deliberation graphic pictured here. The graphic expands slightly on the Goals of Deliberation figure in an occasional paper published in summer 2009 by Public Agenda. The paper, written by Martin Carcasson, Director of Colorado State University's Center for Public Deliberation (and a workshop presenter at NCDD 2008), outlines three broad categories of goals for deliberation. [1]

In the report, I outline how our respondents feel their work falls under each of the sub-categories under the three types of goals, and include direct quotes from dozens of respondents.

Carcasson contends in his article that improved community problem solving should be the ultimate goal of deliberative practice. Rather than overly identifying with specific issues or processes (and the squabbles between them) or focusing solely on individual events and projects, Carcasson argues that dialogue and deliberation practitioners should become "known for their passionate focus on democratic problem solving and all that entails."

Here is how Carcasson describes community problem solving:

> At its best and most effective, community problem solving is a democratic activity that involves the community on multiple levels, ranging from individual action to institutional action at the extremes, but also includes all points in between that involve groups, organizations, non-profits, businesses, etc. It is also deeply linked to the work of John Dewey and his focus on democracy as 'a way of life' that requires particularly well-developed skills and habits connected to problem solving and communicating across differences.

Many of our 88 respondents mentioned civic capacity building when asked how their work impacts citizens' role in democratic governance.

The action & change challenge

More and more people are coming to realize that addressing the major challenges of our time is dependent on our ability to collectively move to a new level of thinking about those challenges, and that dialogic and deliberative processes help people make this leap. Yet we continually struggle with how best to link dialogue and deliberation with action and change, and with the misperception that dialogue and deliberation are "just talk."

For the "Action and Change Challenge," we explored this question: "How can we strengthen the links between dialogue, deliberation, community action, and policy change?" Eight themes emerged in this challenge area at the 2008 NCDD conference and in dialogues, interviews and surveys with conference attendees:

- Defining success for ourselves and developing clear theories of change
- A broader and more systemic view of "action and change"

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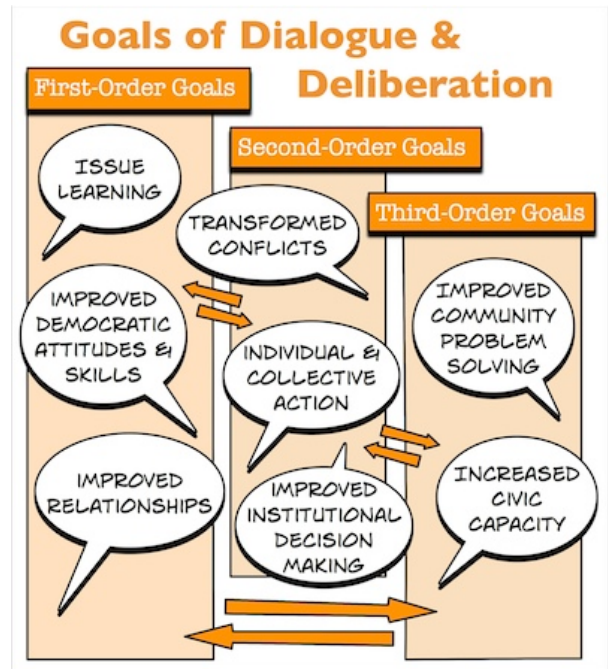
[1] Carcasson, Martin. *Beginning with the End in Mind: A Call for Goal-Driven Deliberative Practice* (Summer 2009, Public Agenda's Center for Advances in Public Engagement).

- Matching process with purpose
- Transparency about goals and expected outcomes
- Cautious framing of potential outcomes
- Building capacity in social change methods
- Evaluating, and learning from mistakes

Survey respondents, interviewees and conference attendees had many other suggestions for this challenge area, and some of those are listed in the report as well. Strengthening the link between public engagement and action and policy change is a challenge that every practitioner struggles with.

In this section of the report, I highlight a couple of promising frameworks that were presented at the conference. Maggie Herzig's "Virtuous and Vicious Cycles" model is presented, which acknowledges the systemic and cyclical nature of dialogue and deliberation (as opposed to a linear progression of steps or stages). And Philip Thomas' integral theory of dialogue seeks to reconcile the seemingly incompatible views of dialogue he came across while working on the *Handbook on Dialogue* published by the United Nations Program on Development and its partners. Thomas interviewed some practitioners who felt, for example, that personal transformation among dialogue participants was a critical outcome to emphasize in the Handbook, while others he interviewed wanted to de-emphasize and even eliminate such concepts from the book and focus primarily on political processes and outcomes.

The systems challenge

For the "Systems Challenge," we explored ways we can make public engagement values and practices integral to government, schools, and other systems, so that our methods of involving people, solving problems, and making decisions are used more naturally and efficiently. At the conference, we focused most on institutionalizing public engagement in *governance*—an area often referred to by scholars as "embeddedness."

Most of the themes identified as being part of the Action & Change Challenge also overlap with the Systems Challenge in critical ways. Five additional themes emerged in discussions about this challenge area at the conference:

- Cultivating and supporting public engagement practitioners
- Joint ownership of programs and structures
- Building on existing structures and resources
- Demonstrating the impact of our processes—together
- Taking advantage of new opportunities

In this section of the report, I go into detail about the outcomes of a two-part workshop at the Austin conference co-led by Adin Rogovin and DeAnna Martin. The workshop brought together method leaders and practitioners in a dynamically facilitated fishbowl conversation to explore how practitioners could weave together their work to enhance democracy. Participants in this workshop discussed how a collaborative, multi-process "demonstration project" could support, fund, advocate for and convene whole system engagement initiatives that involve government officials and demonstrate their legitimacy and value to our society.

Susan Schultz, Program Manager of the Center for Public Policy Dispute Resolution at the University of Texas, summed up the Systems Challenge area well with this comment in the survey:

> It is indeed a challenge to bridge the gap between the concept of having the public involved in public policy decision-making (what is already on paper) and the actuality of having the public influence public decision-making (what realistically happens). I believe that a crucial component in having a meaningful public participation system in place is to make the commitment to that participation part of the organization's and governmental entity's culture. Easier said than done, but it starts with clear written policies, commitment to implementing those policies from high level "champions" to field staff (through consistent education and training), and persistent expectations from the public.