



Alternative mechanisms for hearing the voice of the citizen

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Purpose

This paper will elucidate what we already know about citizen-centric or e-government, and the possible impacts of this style of governance upon vulnerable communities. This discussion will create the context for an argument regarding the appropriateness of e-governance in comparison to alternative mechanisms for hearing the citizen's voice. It will be demonstrated that alternative mechanisms that can be utilised by government to increase public participation are not only more appropriate for engaging the community but also enable an empowering exchange of ideas, experience and knowledge to inform government policy creation and service delivery.

Why engage the community?

It is widely accepted that merely undertaking elections every four years does not fulfil the central tenets of a democratic state. It is also accepted that to be a functioning democracy a continuing process of vigorous and representative debate must occur between the community and the government. Individuals and communities should have the opportunity to express their views unreservedly, and their thoughts, ideas and opinions should be able to influence the outcome of the decisions that affect them (Chia & Patmore 2002).

Government is not the only forum in which good ideas are formed. Knowledge, experience, skills, ideas and different ways of operating can be found in abundance within the community, particularly from service users (Maddison 2004). Additionally, citizen engagement in the development and implementation of policy is vital in generating an increased sense of value in the work that government does (Curtain 2003).

This engagement with the community is largely an effective illustration of democracy in action. Democracy is people being able to influence the decisions that affect their social lives, work lives, community, government and country (Chia & Patmore 2004).

The 'voice of the citizen' is heralded as a system of governance that recognises the need to create partnerships with the community within the realm of social policy and service creation. Citizen-centric governance is a concept concerned with restructuring government social services so that individuals can access these services more freely and also have an opportunity to influence and shape the policies and services that government will create. It is also a feature of this system that much of the information, service and consultation that governments provide will be offered in an online environment. The proponents of this system strongly suggest that the previously disadvantaged will be able to increasingly participate and influence the systems that affect them (Dept. Communications, Information Technology and the Arts 2007).

While SACOSS unreservedly supports government initiatives where increased participation is the impetus, we vigorously argue that the danger of implementing this style of governance without appropriate and extensive research into the effects of social and digital exclusion is immense. User engagement and participation is an extremely complex issue, and the assumption that all service users are on a level footing in their ability to create effective and functional partnerships with government is erroneous. It is unreasonable to suppose that all service users will be able to influence and create the social policy, social service and political environments they require, for this system does not recognise the subjectivity of the desire to participate, personal circumstance, needs, wants, and capacity (Miller 2004).

Those in society who are technically proficient and enthusiastic about this form of governance will undoubtedly be the only voices heard. This will only serve to create a system of government in

which public consultation will be available only to those motivated to participate, with regular access to computers and the internet, and/or are technical proficiency in information technology.

According to the Australian Federal Government (Dept. Communications, Information Technology and the Arts 2007), household internet access is currently situated at 60 per cent. With 40 per cent of households in Australia still without regular internet access it is not unreasonable to assert that a large disparity still exists. Even within OECD countries, the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) reports that there are only approximately 332 internet users per 1000 people (compared to 26.5 users per 1000 people within developing nations) (UNDP, 2003, cited in Wyatt et al 2005). Concern is still rightfully expressed within relatively rich countries, such as Australia, the United States and the European Union, about the effects of digital exclusion on some groups. The groups most likely to be socially and digitally excluded are the homeless, the unemployed, people with low levels of education or income, ethnic minorities, indigenous groups, immigrants, and the elderly (Wyatt et al 2005). These groups are far less likely to use or have access to information technology or the internet (Dept. Communications, Information Technology and the Arts 2007).

These disadvantaged groups are already marginalised and oppressed within our society, and moving more services and information online will only serve to compound the silencing of this section of our population. The social effects ensuing from the digital divide should not be underestimated. To support this view, former Secretary to the United Nations Kofi Annan illustrated the gravity of digital exclusion succinctly when he said

Placed in context, being able to access information technology is a privilege enjoyed by a minority of the global population, but for those living in societies where opportunity depends on being able to bridge the digital divide, the deprivation compares to lack of food, shelter and basic survival sources

(Kofi Annan BBC Online Network, 1999 #101, cited in The Australian Institute for Social Research 2006).

Excluding sections of the populace from participating freely within systems of governance (even inadvertently) could not by any stretch of the imagination be considered a 'democratic' consultative process and would once again be at the expense of the already marginalised and disadvantaged (Geiselhart 2004).

There is no doubt that e-governance and e-commerce is a convenient and cheaper mode of organisation for government and business. It is also a convenient way for consumers with access to information technology and a line of available credit to interact with government (federal, state and local), government departments and businesses. SACOSS asks, who is excluded from the convenience of these electronic channels how does this affect these individuals and groups now, and how will it affect them in the future?

SACOSS argues that there are alternative ways to engage the community and increase user participation that are not only well established and successful but also exhibit measurable benefits for community involvement and empowerment.

Alternatives to e-governance

Throughout the world there are a range of public consultancy methods that have been utilised to great effect when seeking out the thoughts, opinions and input of the public or consumers of an organisation. These deliberative inclusion processes (DIPs) can be used in many ways to gather information, test social policies, garner community attitudes, debate an issue or develop policy and services. DIPs can involve either relatively small groups or thousands of people. The discussion will now turn to a description of some of the most popular consultative processes, including a brief appraisal of their efficacy.

Citizen Jury

The Citizen Jury is a process, much like a jury in a court room, in which a group of citizens become informed about an issue, deliberate together and develop well informed responses and recommendations. Both the process and output are community representative, allowing effective participation and the exercise of democracy (Jefferson Centre 2006). The Citizen Jury is particularly effective for decision making on complex and highly technical issues which require an increased level of knowledge and expertise (Curtain 2003).

The Citizen Jury process is designed for decision-makers to acknowledge and hear the voice of the citizen. A Citizen Jury provides an environment in which citizens are able to learn about issues that affect them and then actively deliberate to find solutions that suit them as a community or interest group. The major benefit for decision makers is that they can utilise the recommendations of the jury to inform public policy development and/or social service design and delivery. The information gathered is both informed and representative of the public. This community involvement and input creates an environment of support for public policy, as it has been informed and created by the people. The information gathered from this process is invaluable for decision makers to inform social policy and service delivery within government and government departments at the local, state, and national levels (Jefferson Centre 2006).

It is most effective and community representative if the participants of the jury are randomly selected. This allows the jury to be comprised of a microcosm of society rather than a group of like minded individuals. This community representation allows the jury to be able to make the best and most effective contributions to social policy or social service initiatives (Jefferson Centre 2006).

Citizen Juries are considered appropriate for public consultation as the groups of participants are smaller than some other forms of consultation — deliberations can therefore be more in-depth and complex. Evaluation of the usefulness of this form of consultation indicates that it is achieving the needs of public participation and involvement in the decision-making process (Jefferson Centre 2006).

Despite the successes that Citizen Juries deliver, a weakness of this model of public consultation is perceived within economic and resource terms. Citizen Juries can involve large time commitments and are often resource intensive (Abelson et al 2001). However, the costs involved can be creatively 'shared' with other stakeholders or some form of sponsorship can be arranged. Costs, although higher than some other processes, can be contained due to the Citizen Jury being smaller than other deliberative methods (Carson & Hart 2006).

Consensus Conferences

Consensus Conferences are similar to citizen's juries but are a more formalised process in which a coordinator convenes an advisory group which randomly selects a panel of citizens who match a socio-economic profile. The Conference, and the topic that will be deliberated over, are widely publicised. During the Conference, it is up to the participants to develop their own strategies that enable the development of effective recommendations. Therefore the participants feel as if they have ownership over the process and results of the Conference. Deliberations are usually conducted in smaller groups, and at the culmination of the Conference a report is prepared for the commissioning authority outlining the recommendations made by the participants (Department of Sustainability and the Environment 2006).

The Consensus Conference is normally conducted over a longer period of time than a Citizen jury. The common process of the Conference involves a preparatory meeting prior to the decision-making component of the Conference. A Consensus Conference generally involves preparatory weekends intended to arrange the key questions and work to be deliberated as well as arranging the calling of witnesses prior to the holding of a deliberative, decision-making meeting.

An example of a successful Consensus Conference held within Australia was that organised by the Australian Consumers Association in 1999. The Consensus Conference discussed and deliberated the impact of gene technology and was carried out over three days at the Old Parliament House in Canberra. This Conference sought to redress issues of power between medical experts and the rest of the population and to allow ordinary people to discuss and have input into important social issues (Choice 2006).

The period of time necessary for a Consensus Conference to run its course can be one to two years. Therefore, despite their successes and citizen engagement qualities, a disadvantage of a Consensus Conference is that it may require a considerable devotion of time and resources.

Focus Groups

Focus Groups are an effective way for people with a particular interest or 'focus' to discuss an issue and develop strategies and recommendations or action. Focus Groups should not be used in isolation to deliberate a particular issue as the participants are usually people with a particular interest or motivation on an issue and decisions and process may be steered by the strong views of the participants. Focus Groups should be utilised to discuss issues, refine questions and be used in conjunction with other consultative processes (for example consensus conference preparation). The most significant disadvantage of Focus Groups is that they are essentially made up of motivated people already familiar with the subject that is being deliberated on and have a clear, vested interest in the outcome. In this light it is fair to say that most Focus Groups could not claim to be a representative microcosm of populations or have citizen participation at the heart of their existence, however when used as the refining of terms of reference for larger consultative processes they are quite effective (Carson & Gelber 2001).

Charrettes

A Charrette involves a rapid and dynamic interchange of ideas between planning practitioners, stakeholders and the general public. To prepare for a Charrette, the subject of the discussion is widely publicised and large public spaces are booked for citizen participation. The Charrette is convened by a team of planning practitioners, who work extensively with the participants to develop realistic planning proposals (Curtain 2003). The main advantage of the Charrette for

decision makers is that it is a rapid planning process which produces effective results within one week. A Charrette is also a relatively cost effective process. The advantages for community inclusion are that the community is involved both in determining the outcomes that are expected and in assessing any proposals or recommendations developed at the final stage. There is the opportunity for the participants to have input and contribute at a number of stages in the planning process (Carson & Gelber 2001).

A disadvantage of the charette system is that as it occurs over a short time frame participants may feel they haven't been given sufficient time to assimilate the information developed or to contribute effectively. The participants of a Charrette are also not selected at random, instead populated through large public meetings. Consequently there is the danger of the participants of the Charrette being mainly motivated members of the community who are already familiar with the topic under discussion. It therefore may not include many people already excluded from consultation and could possibly be under-representative of the wider community (Carson & Gelber 2001).

Citizen Panels

Citizen Panels often establish a pool of potential respondents within an area of concern. The Panel can be made up of 500 people or as many as 5000. This group of respondents can then be utilised to participate in a variety of qualitative research that provides important information within the consultative process. The Panel may also be called upon to participate in Citizen juries, deliberative polls or consensus conferences. The participants of the Panel are randomly selected and maintained by the use of a database. The members are selected to mirror as much as is practicable the demographic of the location arranging the Panel. The Panel usually meets over an extended period on a regular basis. To increase participant numbers and to reduce the chance of participant exclusivity, a certain number of the participants are replaced in regular intervals to ensure the group does not stagnate and that as many people as possible are able to participate (Abelson et al 2001).

Citizen Panels can either be 'research panels' or 'standing panels'. Research panels are formulated by a representative sampling that participates regularly in qualitative research methods to garner community opinion over time. Standing panels are face to face meetings where the participants act as a sounding board to analyse policy proposals or policy implementation.

Critics of Citizen Panels highlight the possible exclusivity of participants, as well as the 'top down' agenda for the process and outcomes of the panels, as weaknesses of this approach. Nevertheless governments (especially in Europe, and the United Kingdom in particular) are increasingly embracing Citizen Panels, as the benefits of drawing upon the wealth of knowledge and experience that citizens possess has become integral to their social policy and service delivery processes.

Discussion

Based upon the research presented, the main disadvantages of the consultative methods illustrated would appear to be issues of time and finance. However, these factors aside, there are many positive, capacity building and socially encompassing advantages to consulting in a more community minded and inclusive way.

It is useful to reiterate that at least 40 per cent of our population nationwide are not able to engage in an online participatory forum; therefore any internet based system (if implemented in isolation) carries the risk of being populated by those people who have axes to grind and have their own agendas. The 'squeaky wheels' (*are the ones that get the oil*), as they are colloquially known, can hijack consultative processes to suit their own ends and render these processes ineffective. These

forums, while appearing to be consultative, will hardly be representative of our wider community nor will they reflect the needs, wants, desires or expertise of a cross-section of society (Carson & Hart 2006).

The random deliberative sampling that is a feature of many DIPs ensures that it is not only the 'squeaky wheels' being heard, and that the thoughts, opinions and input gained will more likely be a representation of whole populations rather than interest groups. The advantages of random selection for decision makers is that it not only appears to be a fair method of consultation (where everyone has the chance of participating) but also ensures a greater diversity in voices and a greater chance of more lively deliberation (Carson & Hart 2006).

According to recent research, interest by government in DIPs is rapidly increasing worldwide. Governments are becoming more cognisant of the representative qualities of these methods and in the way that the citizen's voice is able to contribute to social policy and service creation as well as being invaluable for social inclusion. According to Curtain (2003) the use of citizen panels by local authorities in the United Kingdom rose from 18 per cent in 2001 to 71 per cent in 2003. Conversely, within Australia the interest level and take-up of DIPs within all jurisdictions is virtually non-existent. Between 1993 and 2004 there were a total of 35 DIPs conducted across the nation with most occurring in Western Australia (statistics for South Australia alone were not available). The relative indifference shown towards DIPs by Australian decision makers is in stark contrast to their vigorous embracing of non-representative and potentially exclusionary processes like e-governance.

SACOSS agrees that new technologies can play a unique role in reaching some sectors of the community, in conjunction with other methods, and allows for participatory imperatives to be created in a cost effective way. However, this system cannot be a surrogate for representative community consultation.

This paper highlights several disadvantages to relying on new technologies, including the facts that a significant proportion of the population still lack internet access, and not all members of the public feel comfortable participating in the digital realm. These disadvantages will result in exclusion of individuals and groups from participating in an online governance system and ultimately will increase the effects of social isolation.

Effective community consultation assists citizens not only to feel a part of the democratic process but more importantly to feel valued as active and engaged citizens. Engaged citizens are 'included' citizens and feel a connection to the community in which they live — from that engagement and connection flows social capital which contributes to the wellbeing and functioning of effective communities.

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