

Public Forums

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Tool summary

In a public forum ordinary citizens are called upon to participate in discussions of public issues of importance in their daily lives. Public forums provide an opportunity to share information, present the issues, and hear ideas, opinions, and personal experiences from people of diverse backgrounds. A public forum allows ordinary citizens to discuss, deliberate and, in some cases, decide on a specific issue of public concern. Ideally, it opens the path to follow-up opportunities where concerned citizens can deepen their discussion, develop alternative approaches, make recommendations and sustain a dialogue with decision-makers.

What is it?

A Public forum serves as a space where people in a community of a city, state or country to come together to listen, learn, and discuss important issues. They are best led by trained facilitators, well-informed of the issue at hand, and well-publicized beforehand. These meetings serve to bring people together, allowing them to not only express their views but also find out about the community's needs and preferences, and develop ways to tackle these issues. The public forums allow members of the general public to participate in reasoned discussions that generally result in recommendations to be considered by public officials in their decision-making, though the public forum itself may not have any legally mandated decision-making authority.

Public forums may be conducted for varied purposes, for example, raising awareness on public issues, public opinion mobilization, policy and planning formulation, etc. They may be organized by various levels of government agencies such as national, regional or local or by civil society organizations at different geo-political levels. A case in point is the annual public forum organized by the [World Trade Organization](#). It is an important first step towards understanding the community's needs and goals, and towards putting in place a more substantive participatory process.

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Irrespective of who organizes it or at which level or for what purpose it is organized, Public forums share some common characteristics ([Institute for Local Government, 2007](#)):

- Include members of the broader public in order to foster participation by diverse and representative interests and communities;
- Consider matters of public interest, action, and/or policy;
- Are usually facilitated;
- Are often informed by impartial background information, materials and/or design models;
- Illuminate various points of view and encourage the reasoned exchange of information and the consideration of practical trade-offs;
- Encourage changes in participants' thinking;
- Result in a more informed understanding of the topic by participants and, often indirectly, by the larger community; and
- Seek as much common ground or consensus on a topic as can be realistically and authentically reached

How is it done?

The Washington-based [Public Forum Institute](#) offers a guide to organizing a public forum on a small budget. Here are the essential steps:

1. *Audience-building and publicity*

The assistance of other involved community members from diverse backgrounds must be sought to help lay the groundwork, and determine human, financial, structural and organizational resources that already exists or required. In the initial planning stages, the exact purpose, target group, and process for the public forum must be reviewed by asking questions such as for e.g.: Who will be interested in this topic? What organizations are already doing work in this area? What is my budget? Does it need help from other organizations with publicity? Are there others who will endorse this event? And so on.

Key tasks include:

- Focusing on the key issue for discussion to be clear about the purpose such as: Is it informational only? Is it to resolve a conflict? Is it to empower community members to take action?
- Working with the media to publicize event
- Reaching out to the community and key organisations and individuals



2. Preparing the forum

To ensure a successful public forum, programming and logistics must be firmly settled. It is also important to ensure that varied perspectives are represented, and every effort must be made to reach out to people from marginalized groups. From the point of view of follow-up, those in positions of power must also be involved.

Programming:

- Ensuring the representation of different and diverse voices from the community. In cases of 'divided communities', people from different sides must be brought together beforehand to avoid clash at public forum.
- Allowing some time for addressing each of the following topics: issues and concerns; barriers and resistance to addressing the issues and concerns; community resources for change; and recommended alternatives and solutions.
- Choosing a discussion leader or group facilitator who is known and respected, who is neutral on the topic, who has good listening and group process skills, and who can keep things moving and on track.
- Concluding with a summary of what was achieved and a preliminary plan of action.
- Announcing the next meeting whenever possible.

Site logistics:

- Developing clear specifications of the needs beforehand in order to choose the most appropriate options regarding location and format.
- Scheduling the forum at an easy-to-find, public location which is accessible and comfortable such as for e.g. a library or a school.
- Holding meetings at different sites to get real representation.
- If possible, holding the forum in the evening to make it convenient for working people or students.
- Ensuring there is a reliable method to record/document the proceedings and conclusions.
- Laying out the ground rules at the very start of the forum to ensure smooth conduct of the proceedings and within the allocated time.

3. Follow-up

- Evaluating what went well and what didn't.

- Preparing a written summary of observations, ideas, and outline of follow-up activities, and distributing to all participants conveying ‘thanks’, and with mention of opportunities for further involvement.
- Preparing media releases and statements.
- Organizing a plan to work with appropriate individuals/groups on follow-up activities.

Benefits

- Easy to organize in terms of resources and logistics
- Offers insights into needs and priorities of community.
- Generates information and data that are important for guiding future activities.
- Helps local government to decide on priorities and contested issues.
- Brings the community together around important issues and facilitates community cohesion
- Strengthens the political culture of deliberation amongst the community members
- Helps to bring together local government and community members in a joint process of deliberation on key public issues.
- Generate information (or “public knowledge”) in the form of ideas, preferences or recommendations that will be considered by public officials in their decision-making.

Challenges and lessons

- Managing time can be a delicate balancing act for the facilitator to ensure people have enough time to speak while moving the proceedings along so that participants do not lose energy and motivation.
- Runs the risk of further deepening the division within community on highly contested issues. For such issues, public forums require a lot of preparatory groundwork by bringing together key proponents of the different camps and assessing whether a public forum approach is likely to assist in solving contentious issues.
- It is difficult to organize public forums in large cities with huge populations; where organizing a single (or even a small number of) face-to-face meetings may prove to be a manageable solution. In such cases, the alternatives are internet-based e-forums (where connectivity is high) or, where resources allow, organizing a series of meetings in smaller districts/wards of the city, each time selecting representatives to do a follow-up, city-wide meeting.
- Ensuring representation and a space for the marginalized sections of society in public forums is a major challenge since the more powerful people could dominate the proceedings.

Key resources

Bone, Z. Crockett, J & Hodge, S. *Deliberation Forums: A Pathway for Public Participation* Australia Pacific Extension Network (2006)

- ☞ This paper deals with the deliberative approach being piloted in Australia at the community level by Charles Sturt University with a local Catchment Management Authority (CMA) whose charter aims to involve communities in decision-making, seeking to make best use of catchment knowledge and expertise. One of the key learning that the paper documents is that the forums that are inclusive and participatory are more likely to foster action driven by the community.

Community Tool Box: *Conducting Public Forums and Listening Sessions*, Kansas University Work Group (KU Work Group, USA..

http://ctb.ku.edu/tools/sub_section_main_1021.htm

- ☞ The Work Group's Community Tool Box (CTB) is the world's largest resource with over 7,000 pages of content for building capacity for community health and development. The section on Public Forums in the CTB is a useful guide on conducting public forums with a special emphasis on community health issues

Centre for Public Deliberation, Colorado University

<http://www.cpd.colostate.edu/>

- ☞ Centre for Public Deliberation (CPD) aims to promote the development of a vibrant deliberative democracy in Northern Colorado. CPD organizes Public Forums on various issues with different stakeholder groups

Gastil, J. *Is Face-to-Face Citizen Deliberation a Luxury or a Necessity for Democracy?* A paper prepared for University of Washington Workshop on Communication and Civic Engagement May 19-20, 2000

- ☞ An interesting research paper that explores the efficacy and efficiency of face-to-face forums vs. internet based models of public deliberation in producing democratic effects on participants

Institute for Local Government: *Planning Public Forums, Questions to Guide Local Officials*

<http://www.ca-ilg.org/publicforums>

http://www.cnrep.org/documents/handbooks/Planning_Public_Forums.pdf

- ☞ Founded in 1955, the Institute for Local Government is the nonprofit affiliate of the League of California Cities, and more recently of the California State Association of Counties (CSAC). The Collaborative Governance Initiative (CGI) of the ILG provides information and resources to help local officials in California make good decisions about the design



and use of public engagement in their cities and counties. The publication cited above is a very useful resource by way of asking key threshold questions for local government officials who wish to organize public forums

London, S. *Creating Citizens Through Public Deliberation*. Kettering Foundation (2004)

http://www.scottlondon.com/reports/creating_citizens.pdf

☞ This is a documentation of how civic organizations in ten countries viz. Argentina, Brazil, Colombia, Guatemala, Romania, Tajikistan, Russia, South Africa, Hungary and Puerto Rico have been using various forms of deliberative dialogues including the public forums to build and strengthen democracy

National Issue Forums Institute (NIFI): *Forum Starter Kit*

<http://www.nifi.org/forums/organize.aspx>

<http://www.nifi.org/forums/starterkit.aspx>

☞ National Issues Forums (NIF) is a network of civic, educational, and other organizations, and individuals, whose common interest is to promote public deliberation in America. Each year, major issues of concern are identified by the NIF network. Issue discussion guides, which provide an overview of the subject and present several approaches, are prepared to frame the deliberative work. The Forum Starter Kit is one of the most valuable guides on organizing public deliberation forums. It includes a sample issue book, an NIF publications catalogue and introductory materials to NIF.

National Coalition for Dialogue & Deliberation (NCDD), USA: *Running a Public Dialogue & Deliberation Programme - the basics*.

http://www.thataway.org/?page_id=714

<http://www.youtube.com/profile?user=sheierbacher&view=playlists>

☞ This NCDD link provided useful tips and guidelines for organizing a public dialogue and deliberation programme very similar to public forum. NCDD has also prepared a video play list on D&D events which can be accessed from the second link

Our Community, Australia: *Holding Public Forums*

http://www.ourcommunity.com.au/advocacy/advocacy_article.jsp?articleId=2412

☞ Our Community is a world-leading social enterprise that provides resources, advice and tools for Australia's 700,000 community groups and schools - anchored by 16 online Knowledge Centres and associated publications and training. Their website provides a good outline on methodology for holding public forums



Oklahoma Partnership for Public Deliberation (OPPD)

<http://www.okdeliberates.org/newsite/Convening.htm>

- ☞ This OPPD link gives some tips and guidelines for convening a public deliberative forum

Public Forum Institute, USA: *Community Guide to organizing a public forum on a Shoe String Budget*

<http://www.publicforuminstitute.org/publications/guide/index.htm>

- ☞ The Public Forum Institute is an independent, nonpartisan, not-for-profit organization committed to developing the most advanced and effective means of fostering public discourse. The community Guide published by the Forum is one of the key resources for conducting public forums and has four sections, each devoted to the four components of public forums.

Water Forum, a Power point presentation by L.McDaniel

<http://waterquality.okstate.edu/oldsite/EVENTS/WaterForum/LMcDaniel.pdf>

- ☞ The presentation contains 35 slides starting with a conceptual framework for public deliberation and describing different types/sizes of public forums.

Walmsley, H.L., *Mad scientists bend the frame of bio-bank governance in British Columbia*. Journal of Public Deliberation Volume 5, Issue 1 Article 6 2009

<http://services.bepress.com/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1073&context=jpd>

- ☞ In the light of heavy criticism leveled against deliberative forums by social and political scientists, for positively and narrowly framing contentious new technologies to secure public support, and for privileging consensus over 'difference, this research article, drawing from ethnographic participant-observation and analysis of a deliberative public consultation on bio-banking in British Columbia (BC), Canada, argues for careful attention to deliberative event design.

Case studies

Jordan's Public Forums Initiative

In order to respond to the major deficits highlighted in the UN reports, including a varying lack of freedom and a general lack of women's emancipation, a group of Arab researchers and activists joined forces to address the challenges associated with the region's intricate democratic transition. The group established the Arab Network for the Study of Democracy (ANSD) in 2005 with the aim of mainly supporting a bottom-top democratic transition which was a major challenge as well. In collaboration with the Kettering Foundation, the ANSD launched Arab Democratic Initiative under which several forums have been organized on: political participation and electoral law in Egypt, Morocco, Yemen, and Lebanon; environment in Algeria; the issue of equal pay in Bahrain; and the issue of unemployment in Jordan, deliberated in as many as six forums. These forums have helped identify the often-missed connection between people, social and economic interests, and democratic transitions while many marginalized groups, such as youth and women, have felt included in the discussion and search for solutions.

Source:

http://www.kettering.org/readers_forum/readers_forum/readers_forum_articles/Jordans-Public-Forums-Initiative

Public Forums by Shaleshock Citizen Action Alliance

[Shaleshock Citizens Action Alliance](#) based in the U.S.A. is a grassroots group of Finger Lakes residents who are concerned with understanding and protecting our communities and environment from exploitation by the energy industry with regards to drilling for natural gas in the Marcellus Shale. The Alliance has organized several public forums on the effects of Marcellus Shale gas drilling on local water sources bringing experts, drilling companies, landowners, public authorities and communities together on a common forum

For more information, visit:

<http://www.shaleshock.org/?s=public+forum>

Public forums as part of the Stop-the-Stock-outs Campaign in Africa

Public health facilities in Africa have in stock only about half of a core set of essential medicines. These are medicines used to treat common diseases such as malaria, pneumonia, diarrhea, HIV, TB, diabetes and hypertension, all of which are among the highest causes of death in Africa. The Stop-the-Stock-outs Campaign in Africa was launched to tackle this problem.



The campaign is calling on governments and health departments to end stock-outs by giving financial and operational autonomy to the national medicines procurement and supply agency; allowing representation of civil society on the board of the national medicines procurement and supply agency; ending corruption in the medicine supply chain to stop theft and diversion of essential medicines; providing a dedicated budget line for essential medicines; living up to commitments to spend 15% of national budgets on health care; and providing free essential medicines at all public health institutions.

Several public forums have been organized to spread out the campaign message to the people on the ground as well as to create better awareness of stock outs and unavailability of essential medicines. The forums generally brings together policy makers, health professionals and civil society organizations working on health issues and offers a good opportunity for consumers and patients to discuss problems around access to essential medicines including the causes and possible solutions. The forums are also expected to empower the public to put pressure on government to provide essential medicines in public health institutions.

Sources:

<http://stopstockouts.org/category/updates/>

<http://stopstockouts.org/2009/06/16/kenyan-team-organizes-two-public-forums/>

Additional case study resources

WTO Public Forum 2009: “Global Problems, Global Solutions: Towards Better Global Governance”

The World Trade Organization (WTO) is the only global international organization dealing with the rules of trade between nations. At its heart are the WTO agreements, negotiated and signed by the bulk of the world’s trading nations and ratified in their parliaments. Over the past few years, the WTO Public Forum has firmly established itself as the major opportunity for governments, non-governmental organizations, academics, businesses and students to come together to discuss issues regarding the multilateral trading system.

http://www.wto.org/english/forums_e/ngo_e/forum09_background_e.htm

Public Forums on Good Governance in Pakistan

The National Institute of Democracy International Affairs and Centre for Civic Education hosted a public forum on good governance in Peshawar, a prt of the North Western Frontier Province in Pakistan



http://www.ndi.org/files/1682_pak_forums_p%2018-21.pdf
<http://www.ndi.org/node/13265>

Dunedin City Council Public Forums, New Zealand

The Dunedin City Council in New Zealand organizes public forums for community development on a regular basis in which all members of the community are allowed to participate but with prior intimation to the Public Forums Coordinator, an employee of the Council

Source: http://www.dunedin.govt.nz/events/council_activities/public-forums

East West Centre Project on Management of Internal Conflicts in Asia

Public Forums are an important component of the *Management of Internal Conflicts in Asia* project, designed to engage the informed public and disseminate the findings of the study groups. Public forums have been organized in conjunction with each round of study group meetings and were widely attended by the public.

<http://www.eastwestcenter.org/ewc-in-washington/collaborative-research/management-of-internal-conflicts-in-asia-phase-1/public-forums/>

The Defenders for Freedom, Justice & Equality, Virginia, USA.

The Defenders for Freedom, Justice & Equality, is an all-volunteer organization based in Richmond, Virginia who have been working for the survival of their community through education and social justice actions since 2002. One of the most effective tools of education and social justice used by Defenders is to convene public forums on topics of national and local relevance.

<http://defendersfje.tripod.com/id17.html>

One Iowa advocacy for LGBT

One Iowa is Iowa state's largest lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender (LGBT) advocacy organization committed to full equality for LGBT individuals, including the freedom to marry. One Iowa is one of the pioneers in using public forums as a means of drumming up public support for basic freedoms for LGBT people and also as a means of deliberation on various legal and policy issues concerned with LGBT.

<http://straighttalkonmarriage.blogspot.com/2009/11/one-iowa-statewide-public-forums.html>

Valley City Halls take public forums to the streets, The Arizona Republic



In a "City Hall Comes to You" drive, Valley mayors and council members say personal interaction with residents makes their jobs worth it and gives them insight into what people care about. Instead of holding outreach meetings in formal venues like libraries or city offices, Avondale has gone a step further, taking government to coffee shops and grocery stores, a friendly environment where you don't need permission to speak up.

<http://www.azcentral.com/news/articles/2009/10/29/20091029mayorcityhall1029.html>

