Developing a deliberative democracy assessment tool for communities

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This article tells the story of the six year learning journey of a small group of citizens in Australia who, as members of the Canberra Alliance for Participatory Democracy (CAPaD), developed assessment processes and tools to empower communities to critically evaluate, openly discuss and continually improve deliberative democracy for the common good.

Operating in the small jurisdiction of the Australian Capital Territory (ACT), which has an urban population of around 460,000 and where the governing body, the twenty-five member Legislative Assembly, covers local and state government functions, this subgroup of CAPaD developed an assessment tool and processes for tracking effective participatory democracy in our local community. The aim was to find ways to give agency, education, awareness and insight to everyday citizens to equip them to critically assess 'participatory 'projects where sponsors and power holders claim to be engaging them in important governance decision making.

The formation of CAPaD
The journey starts in 2015 with some ACT citizens being concerned about the state of their local democracy and, in response, designing and hosting a series of Kitchen Table Conversations, Twenty five hosts used a simple conversation kit to involve over 180 people in these simple and powerful conversations modelled on listening with respect to what mattered to fellow citizens. A report was published of the combined output of all of these conversations.

CAPaD was formed from the energy generated by these kitchen table conversations, and the desire to have the ACT government use similar processes when engaging the community. CAPaD met with newly elected members of the ACT Legislative Assembly and explored with them how they wanted to involve and represent their constituents. At these meetings CAPaD also offered to share an Information kit: Citizen Assembly as best practice consultation April 2016 which outlined international good practices that could be implemented in the ACT.

Implementing locally developed principles of good practice
CAPaD then collaborated with a local civil society advocacy group, the ACT Council of Social Services (ACTCOSS) to design a set of criteria for good practice - Principles/Criteria for the Trial of Citizens 'Juries in the ACT – Jointly prepared by CAPaD and ACTCOSS, August 2017 -

Over 2017 and 2018 the ACT Government made a focussed effort to engage the community by holding four participatory deliberative processes:

- Carers 'Voice Panel
- Compulsory Third Party Insurance Citizens 'Jury
- Better Suburbs
- Housing Choices

CAPaD's volunteer members used the criteria developed with ACTCOSS for Citizens 'Juries to observe and assess, where possible, the four engagement processes implemented by the ACT Government. They also engaged with some of the participants and facilitators to hear qualitative feedback on their experience of the processes.

CAPaD's intention in undertaking this citizen review was to acknowledge the government's good intentions, to support its commitment to these processes and to encourage continual, incremental improvement in its practice for including citizens in local governance. A report was developed with CAPaD's comments against each of the citizen developed criteria for each of the four projects.

Public servants welcomed the opportunity to listen to an independent community perspective, and gave helpful feedback. Ministers in the local government, however, did not accept CAPaD's offers to meet and discuss these observations and explore ways to continue to improve their excellent start at these practices.

Collaboration to form DeliberateACT
Next, CAPaD collaborated with the Communications and Engagement Division of the ACT Chief Ministers Directorate and the highly regarded Centre for Deliberative Democracy and Global Governance at the University of Canberra to co-facilitate a series of conversations in a community of interest and practice called DeliberateACT hosted by the Museum of Australian Democracy, Old Parliament House. These conversations between community members, local public servants, federal public servants, consultants, academics and visiting democracy practitioners went over two years and were interrupted by the 2019-20 bushfires and COVID-19 lockdowns.

Contribution to the OECD Good Practice Principles for Deliberative Processes
Because of the relationship with the Centre for Deliberative Democracy and Global Governance, CAPaD was invited to collaborate with the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) as part of an international community of practice and research into good deliberative practice (Innovative Citizen Participation and New Democratic Institutions: Catching the Deliberative Wave, June 2020). A set of eleven good practice principles were established from international research (OECD Good Practice Principles for Deliberative Processes for Public Decision Making, June 2020). Our citizen's group was thrilled to see the close coherence between the internationally developed principles and those that had been developed at the local level.

We also learned much from global contemporary practices of citizens assemblies in Ireland, Belgium and Vorarlberg Austria. A key here was the quality of the design and facilitation

processes including using Dynamic Facilitation, Citizens' Cafés and Responder Groups. We hosted several zoom workshops on Empathy and Collaborative Meaning-Making: An Overview of Citizens 'Councils with international practitioners of successful processes.

Developing a tool for citizen application of the OECD principles
In 2021 a Citizens 'Jury, on the topic of gene editing, was held in Canberra. CAPaD designed simple questions based on the eleven OECD good practice criteria, to openly and transparently assess the quality of the citizens jury process. Consequently we developed a simple evidence collection tool, Citizen Assembly / Deliberation Assessment Tool, which aims to empower citizens to ask the right questions so as to gain key insights at each stage of the deliberative process, and to conduct their own evaluation of a deliberative process. This reflective activity also educates citizens about what is important in these processes.

This activity reinforced for our citizen group the importance and legitimacy of the unique and indispensable perspective of the community in evaluating the effectiveness of deliberative processes. While it is important to also understand the constraints under which other stakeholders may have been operating, an independent assessment against objective criteria allows community witnesses to frankly and fearlessly call out weaknesses or failures in design or practice and to also acknowledge good practice.

To an extent, this tool can help to redress the power imbalance between project sponsors and ordinary citizens. It provides key questions for community members to ask of sponsors and power holders in these processes, so that the needs and perspectives of communities are valued and taken into account. The types of questions the community can ask from this analysis include:
- Who is funding the project?
- Do the funders remain at arm's length from the design of the process?
- Is the wider community informed about the process before, during and after its implementation?
- Who selects the expert witnesses?
- Is there a balanced range of views from the expert witnesses, in the areas that are contentious?
- Is there prior commitment from Public authorities to implement the outcomes?
- What are the ethical and moral factors that arise from this analysis and how can they be considered in the process?

Recommendations
We recommend:
1. that the Citizen Assembly / Deliberation Assessment Tool be freely available for communities to use in their local areas from the CAPaD website and others as open source knowledge in the creative commons.
2. that communities in Australia and internationally use the tool to educate themselves on good practice, assess their local deliberative processes and encourage local sponsors to

conduct more deliberative engagement activities and to continually reflect on their practice with the community and improve them.

We invite communities around Australia, and the world, to use the Tool to inform and educate themselves and increase their own agency in their local government area to improve participatory and deliberative democracy. We seek feedback on how the Tool might be improved. We hope citizens and communities might educate themselves about good democratic practices and identify their own unique perspectives and voices amongst multiple stakeholders, so that the collective power of citizens and communities can be heard, welcomed and included in improving good governance and decision making. We would love to hear from communities who have applied the Tool to design and/or evaluate a deliberative process.

Communicate with us via secretary@canberra-alliance.org.au

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