

Engaging Citizens in Social Innovation

**A short guide to the research for policy makers
and practitioners**

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TEPSIE

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To read more about different types of citizen engagement and their value for social innovation, please download our accompanying reports: ‘Mapping citizen engagement in the process of social innovation’ (TEPSIE deliverable 5.1), ‘The value and role of citizen engagement in social innovation’ (TEPSIE deliverable 5.2) and ‘Case Studies: Citizen engagement in social innovation’ (TEPSIE deliverable 5.3). These are all available for download on www.tepsie.eu

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INTRODUCTION

About this paper

Public and civic engagement activities are now widely seen as critical in building trust in public institutions, developing social capital and social cohesion in local communities, and lending great legitimacy to public decision making processes. In the context of social innovation, the idea that citizen engagement is critical to the development and implementation of new solutions is often regarded as a self evident truth.

However, we argue that it is important to have realistic expectations about what citizen engagement can achieve. In this paper, we provide an overview of our recent research on citizen engagement and social innovation. We explain how we understand these two concepts, their relationship, and why this is important. We also give some concrete examples of three methods of engagement activity relevant to social innovation: crowdsourcing, co-design and participatory budgeting. We then summarise recent research on the benefits and risks associated with engagement practices and conclude by suggesting a number of critical issues that policymakers, funders and practitioners must consider before advocating, funding or developing engagement activities.

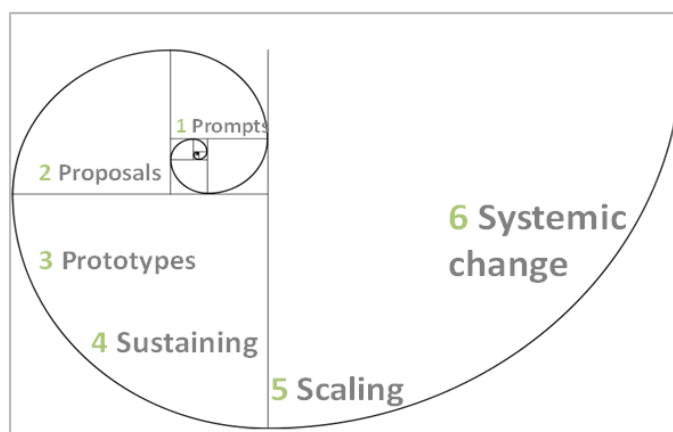
This paper forms part of the TEPsIE project, a research collaboration between six European institutions examining the theoretical, empirical and policy foundations of social innovation across Europe. To read more about the project and other related papers on citizen engagement and social innovation, visit www.tepsie.eu.

DEFINITIONS

What is social innovation?

Social innovations are new solutions (products, services, models, markets, processes etc.) that simultaneously meet a social need (more effectively than existing solutions) and lead to new or improved capabilities and relationships and better use of assets and resources. In other words, social innovations are both good for society and enhance society's capacity to act.¹ Examples include microfinance, fair trade, new models of eldercare, preventative interventions in health and criminal justice, holistic early years' care, co-production and online platforms which enable sharing, mass collaboration and peer-to-peer learning.

The process of social innovation



What is citizen engagement?

Citizen engagement and public participation are two terms which are often used interchangeably.² They refer to a broad range of activities which involve people in the structures and institutions of democracy or in activities which are related to civil society – such as community groups, non-profits and informal associations.

Citizen engagement and public participation are often distinguished from public communication and public consultation. The last two terms suggest a one-way flow of information (from the state to the public and vice versa) rather than a dialogue between the state and the public. Others argue that public consultation is a form of public participation. One useful definition of public participation is provided by the International Association for Public Participation. They examine the different goals of public participation from the point of

¹ The Young Foundation, *Social Innovation Overview*, A deliverable of the project: “The theoretical, empirical and policy foundations for building social innovation in Europe” (TEPSIE), European Commission – 7th Framework Programme, Brussels: European Commission, DG Research, 2012

² And in this paper we use ‘engagement’ interchangeably with ‘participation’.

view of the state.³ This is laid out as a spectrum of participation that moves from inform to consult, to involve, to collaborate, to empower.

Spectrum of Public Participation

	Inform	Consult	Involve	Collaborate	Empower
Public participation goal	To provide the public with balanced and objective information to assist them in understanding the problem, alternatives, opportunities and/or solutions	To obtain public feedback on analysis, alternatives and/or decisions	To work directly with the public to ensure that public concerns and aspirations are consistently understood and considered	To partner with the public in each aspect of the process including the development of alternatives and the identification of the preferred solution.	To place final decision making in the hands of the public.

Source: International Association for Public Participation (2007): Spectrum of public participation

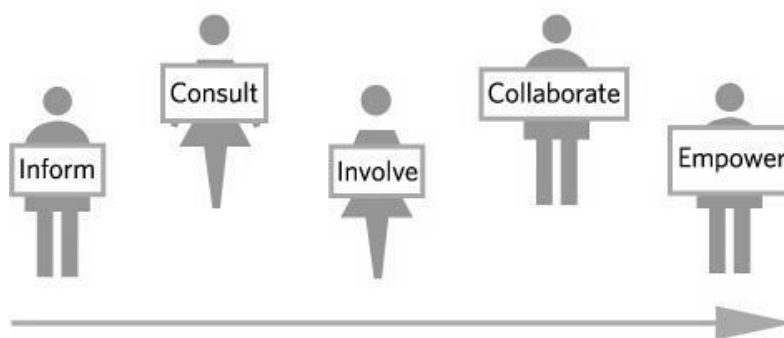


Image source: <https://www.patientvoices.ca/what-we-do/public-engagement>

Although these concepts suggest an incredibly diverse range of activities, we can identify three defining features of engagement or participation:

- People take part in engagement activities voluntarily – participation can be incentivised, but it cannot be coerced.
- Engagement requires some form of action on the part of citizens – participants are not simply passive recipients.
- Participation and engagement activities are usually directed towards some form of collective action which aims for a common purpose or goal. This means that they are often strongly connected to a social mission.

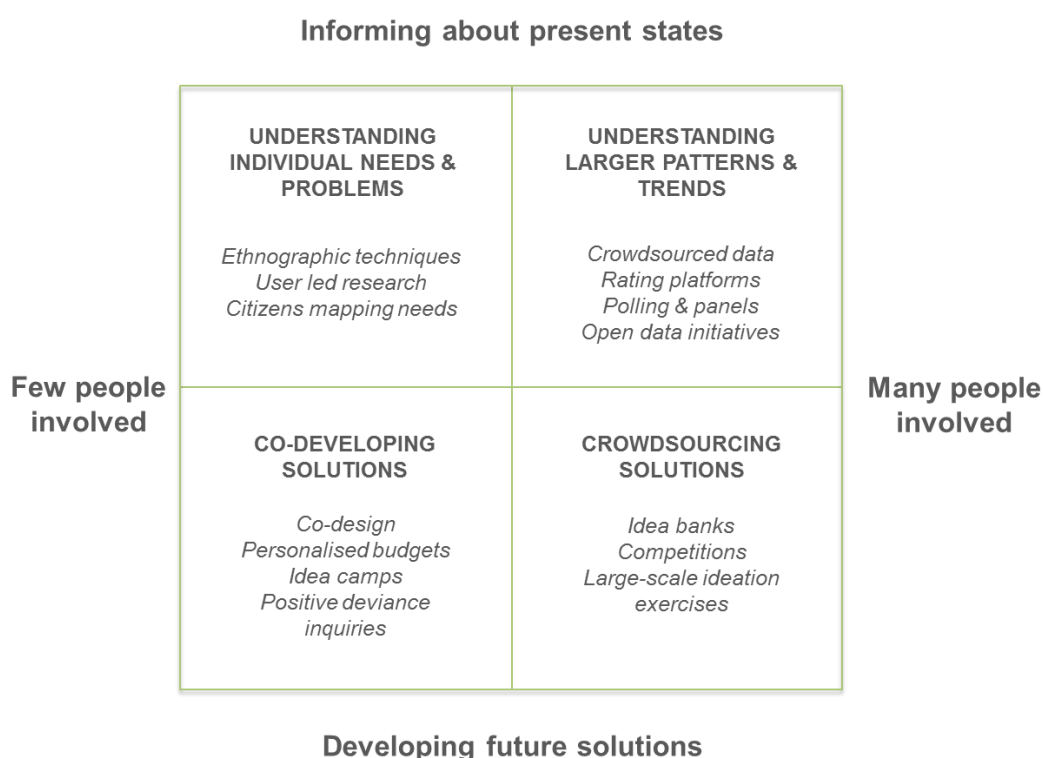
What is citizen engagement in social innovation?

Citizen engagement in social innovation refers to the many ways in which more diverse actors can be brought into the process of developing and then sustaining new solutions to social challenges – essentially how citizens can be involved in developing social innovations and in social projects which are innovative.

³ International Association for Public Participation, 'IAP2 Spectrum of Public Participation' <http://www.iap2.org/associations/4748/files/spectrum.pdf> Viewed on 1 August, 2012

Citizen engagement in the process of social innovation

In the early stages of developing an innovation, citizens can be involved in numerous ways – through research and consultations, through more formal activities such as co-design workshops and idea camps to informal activities online. At this stage, citizens tend to be involved in order to get a better understanding of the needs they are currently experiencing – ‘informing about present states’ or to gather their ideas for new and better solutions – ‘developing future solutions’.⁴



- ‘Informing about present states’ refers to all the ways that citizens can provide information about their current experiences. This information is an essential input throughout the development of a social innovation.
- ‘Developing future solutions’ refers to all kinds of engagement activities whereby citizens can contribute and shape new ideas. These might be ideas that provide the seed for a new innovation, or ideas for how to improve an existing service or model. It includes some methods by which citizens are themselves the source of fully formed new ideas and others where they act as partners with innovators in shaping ideas together.

⁴ This model draws heavily on C Bason, *Leading Public Sector Innovation: co-creating for a better society*, Policy Press, Bristol, 2010, p160.

Citizen engagement in social innovation

Beyond the early stages of research and development, there are lots of ways in which people can be involved in supporting and sustaining social innovations – volunteering and donating money are just two examples. We've looked at the ways people can be involved in social innovations more generally and identified three main functions of citizen engagement in social innovation: providing information and resources; problem solving and; taking and influencing decisions.



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Providing information and resources

One of the functions of citizen engagement is for citizens to provide information about their needs, preferences, ideas and opinions. This information is critical at every stage of the innovation process – from the earliest stages of identifying needs and potential solutions to the later stages of evaluation. At every stage, feedback loops are essential in refining and improving the solutions being developed. Information can be gathered using traditional forms of qualitative and quantitative research but there is now a multitude of platforms which enable people to provide information directly about their own needs, preferences, locations, experiences and so on. This category also includes the provision of resources such as time and money and therefore also includes participation in the form of volunteering and donations. These activities are often essential in sustaining social innovation projects.



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Problem solving

Other activities bring people together in order to solve social problems. Engaging citizens with varied backgrounds and perspectives can introduce divergent thinking which is often crucial to problem solving. Also, there are some challenges which cannot be solved without the co-operation, involvement and support of those involved. This is the case, for example, where solutions to particular challenges involve citizens' own activities and behaviours (for example, self management of chronic disease, lifestyle choices around diet and exercise or new models of care). These are situations where things cannot be done *for* or *to* people but need to be done *with* and *by* them. Activities which fall under this category, for example, include competitions, co-design workshops, social innovation camps, co-production, certain kinds of deliberative processes, and so on.



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Taking and influencing decisions

A third function of citizen engagement in social innovation concerns decision making. This kind of activity goes beyond deliberation by giving citizens significant influence or power over decision making processes; it refers to activities where people have direct involvement in, control or influence over decision making processes and/or the implementation of those decisions. These are often on-going forms of interaction rather than one off events. Activities include formal governance roles, for example within a co-operative or a social enterprise, or within a particular community, such as participatory budgeting or participatory planning.

**WHY IS
CITIZEN
ENGAGEMENT
IN SOCIAL
INNOVATION
IMPORTANT?**

Engagement is often necessary to better understand social needs.

To develop solutions it is first important to identify the challenges and problems that need addressing. In some cases, where it is citizens themselves who develop an innovation, needs and challenges will already be well understood. But often those driving an innovation process are civil servants, public policy makers and non-profit leaders who do not experience these problems and challenges first hand. Citizens themselves are best placed to articulate these challenges. Citizens are experts of their own lives: they have information about themselves that no centralised bureaucracy can ever have, namely, knowledge of their own needs, desires and experiences. The tacit knowledge that citizens hold is often critical to the innovation process.

Citizens can be the source of innovative ideas.

In many cases, citizens themselves hold the relevant knowledge and skills to develop effective innovations. Engagement processes, such as citizen competitions and co-design processes, can help to uncover these ideas.

Engaging citizens introduces divergent thinking which helps to find novel solutions to complex problems.

Diverse perspectives add particular value when we are trying to solve tough problems. This is because people with different perspectives have different 'heuristics' or methods and tools for finding solutions. Diversity is especially important where the problem at hand is complex: if we only look to experts with similar perspectives and heuristics, then they are likely to 'get stuck in the same places'. A diverse group of solvers will not. Research also

suggests problem solvers who are 'marginal' in some sense – e.g. they have expertise in a very different field of study, or are in some sense distant from the 'establishment' in their own professional community - aren't bound by conventional thinking which means that they are often able to approach a problem with novel insights.

Citizen engagement can increase the legitimacy of projects and decisions.

Where citizens have been involved in the design, development and implementation of a social innovation or in a decision making process relating to that innovation, the innovation is more likely to be seen as legitimate than if it had been developed without such a process.

Citizen engagement is necessary because of the nature of the social challenges we face.

Many of these social challenges are 'wicked' or complex problems that defy linear, top-down policy responses. This is because complex problems, by definition, do not have a single 'end' or a 'solution'. Consequently, there is greater importance attached to the process of managing complex problems than trying to resolve them per se. Addressing many of these complex challenges requires behaviour change. For example, in order to mitigate the effects of climate change, we will need to cut our energy use and conserve what is used through recycling and re-use. Solutions to wicked problems therefore cannot be delivered in the way that commercial products are delivered – they require the participation, co-operation and 'buy in' of users.

CASE STUDIES



Image source: <http://www.dse.vic.gov.au/effective-engagement/introduction-to-engagement/what-is-community-engagement>

In what follows we illustrate each of the three functions of citizen engagement (providing information and resources, problem solving and taking and influencing decisions) with a short case study.



Crowdsourcing

Crowdsourcing describes a broad range of activities but, broadly, it involves the wider public (as opposed to experts) in providing information. Recent years have seen a proliferation of online platforms that provide a simple, low-cost way for large groups of citizens to contribute data about their experiences. These platforms have been used to document a huge range of social and environmental issues. The term was first coined by Jeff Howe who defined crowdsourcing as “the act of a company or institution taking a function once performed by employees and outsourcing it to an undefined (and generally large) network of people in the form of an open call. This can take the form of peer production (when the job is performed collaboratively), but is also often undertaken by sole individuals”.⁵

I Paid a Bribe



The I Paid a Bribe platform. Image from <http://democracyspot.net/2012/09/14/i-paid-a-bribe-so-what/>

I Paid a Bribe is an online platform developed by non-profit group Janaagraha that harness the collective energy of citizens to tackle corruption in public services in India. The aim is to understand the scope and scale of corruption by gathering data, to create a network of support and a space where people could share individual stories and experiences, to expose corruption and to use the data to uncover trends, call for changes and gradually eliminate opportunities for corruption altogether. Citizens provide reports about bribes they paid, bribes they resisted and instances where they received a public service without paying a bribe. There is also a ‘bribe hotline’ for people to ask advice about how to avoid paying a bribe. The information collected through the site is then used to advocate changes in governance and accountability processes. Janaagraha produces citizen reports (to help citizens avoid bribery) and reports for government agencies (which identify particularly corrupt teams or departments within public institutions and often contain recommendations for reforms to rules and procedures). The site has now been replicated in Pakistan, Kenya, Greece and Zimbabwe.

⁵ J Howe, quoted in E Schenk and C Guittard, ‘Towards a characterisation of crowdsourcing practices, Journal of Innovation Economics, 2011/1, no.7. pp. 93-107

Origins

I Paid a Bribe was set up by Janaagraha, a non profit organisation which works with citizens to improve the quality of life of Indian cities and towns. An initial prototype was launched to test the concept – and uncover ‘the market price of corruption’. The site was launched in 2010.

Who participates and how?

As of March 2013, the site had received 1.9 million visitors from 197 countries. At the time of writing (March 2013), I Paid a Bribe had collected 22,492 citizen reports, referring to 833,033,890 rupees worth of bribes from 493 cities across India. Of these reports, 16,636 refer to bribes paid, 2,266 of people refusing to pay a bribe and 763 to instances where a bribe was not demanded by ‘honest officers’. By May 2012, more than 1050 questions had been answered via the bribe hotline forum. According to the site, between 25 and 50 citizen reports are added daily and roughly 20 questions are submitted to the ‘bribe hotline’ everyday.⁶

I Paid a Bribe carried out an online user survey. The findings suggest that visitors tend to be young and well educated. Most visitors are aged between 18 and 40, with more 18-25 year olds using the site than 26-40 year olds. The majority of users have a graduate or post-graduate degree.⁷

Value

The key value of crowdsourcing in this instance is to gather information that can be used to paint a picture of the nature, scale and location of bribery in India. This information is important for a number of reasons. First, it can be used to support citizens in their attempts to resist bribery. Second, it can be used as a tool for campaigning and advocacy – it can be used to put pressure on corrupt officials and signal

to citizens that they no longer have to pay bribes. It can also be used to put pressure on government departments to change their processes and procedures, thereby improving public service delivery.

For example there are numerous instances where government rules and procedures have been changed in light of information garnered through the site. One example is the Department of Transport in the Government of Karnataka in Bangalore. Based on the information in I Paid a Bribe’s report, some twenty senior officials were issued with warnings. Similarly, changes were made to registrations of land transactions at the Department of Stamps and Registration in Bangalore.

Challenges

I Paid a Bribe faces the challenge of having only a limited reach. Only those online can use the site. Second, the website is only available in English which means that it cannot be used by the majority of the non-English speaking Indian population. Third, the site focuses on urban centres such as Bangalore and Mumbai. This means that levels of corruption and bribery which take place in rural areas are not reported on the site. However, they are currently working on a mobile interface and exploring the possibility of having Indian language versions too. Another challenge is verifying the accuracy and reliability of the information collected.

Impact

When the project was developed, it was the first attempt to quantify corruption and measure the amount that people were paying in bribes. Most approaches simply gauged people’s perceptions of corruption. It is this which makes I Paid a Bribe so innovative. So, even though there are some issues around the reliability and accuracy of the information provided, the information generated through the site provides the closest measure of the level of petty corruption in India.

⁶ www.ipaidabribe.com

⁷ One World Foundation, ‘I paid a Bribe’ in ICT facilitated access to information innovations: A compendium of case studies from South Asia, One World Foundation, India, 2011



Co-design

Co-design is a term used in many different contexts, and can be defined as “a creative approach that supports and facilitates the democratic involvement of people in addressing social challenges”.⁸ The first stage is diagnosis: co-design processes usually employ ethnographic research methods in order to understand what needs look like – for example, focused observations, mapping user journeys and other forms of visualisation which are used to help participants to identify key issues and develop ideas in response to them. Participants then come together with service providers and others to develop solutions. These workshops require specialist facilitation techniques and therefore co-design is frequently led by an intermediary agency that works with citizens and public sector authorities.

Family by Family, Australia



Families who took part in the program – image courtesy of Chris Vanstone

Family by Family is a new model of family support co-designed with families in South Australia that aims to enable more families to thrive and fewer to come into contact with crisis services. The programme works by finding, training and resourcing families who have overcome tough times (known as ‘sharing families’) and connecting them with families who want things to change (known as ‘seeking families’). Once families have been matched they take part in ‘link up’ activities for between 10 and 30 weeks. Sharing families are supported in their role by weekly coaching sessions and are given a grant (which they can spend on link-up activities, their own families or donate back into Family by Family) in recognition of the intensity of the support they provide. In this model, professionals act as brokers to these family interactions rather than delivering services.

Family by Family was instigated by the Australian Centre for Social Innovation (TACSI) and was developed in the Marion area of Adelaide between May 2010 and March 2011.

⁸ L Tan and D Szebeko, ‘Co-designing for dementia: The Alzheimer 100 project’, *Australasian Medical Journal*, vol.1: 12, 2009, pp. 185-198

Origins

The project began with extensive ethnographic work with local families to better understand family life in this area, what family stress looks like and how families are coping. The team recruited these families by setting up stalls in shopping centres, super markets and bus stops, as well as going door to door. They also ran a community festival, which focused on developmental games for children, to start to build visibility and to spread information about what they were trying to do. The team had dinner with 25 families and spent two to three days with a further ten families. They used all of this information to develop lots of different ideas for services, which they presented to the families they had worked with. Although many of these were dismissed early on, the idea of training thriving families to share their experience with other families had some traction.

Who participated and how?

The core tools and interactions of the programme were then developed by working with a small group of 20 families – prototype sharing families who were looking to use their experience to help others and seeking families who were looking to make some positive changes in their lives. Over 12 weeks the team worked with both kinds of families, kids included, in their homes and with sharing families at their weekly ‘sharing family dinner’ to test and refine areas.

Family input was essential in getting language and messaging for Family by Family right; the team went through five iterations of how they would describe the programme before hitting on an effective formulation. It was the experience of families putting up posters in their local neighbourhoods who were frequently needing to explain what the project was (and wasn’t) that eventually led to the description of the programme: “We’re a group of families who are about more good stuff for families. We link up families with stuff in common to change the things they want to change - like kids’ behaviour or going

out more as a family. We’re not government. We’re not religious. We’re not political.” This description still features on the programme brochures.

Prototyping

Once the core interactions and materials had been designed in partnership with families, the team began prototyping the programme at a small scale with twenty families over 12 weeks. While incentives (such as shopping vouchers) had been used with participants at earlier stages, for the prototype phase, the offer made to families was to be part of building something new. The team felt it was important to test out whether families would want to participate for the rewards of involvement itself, rather than being persuaded by incentives. However, there were some bonuses to being involved, such as weekly meals where the families came together.

To recruit both ‘seeking’ and ‘sharing’ families, hearing the story from other families was essential. Families who had been involved in the ethnography and design work frequently suggested friends and colleagues to take part. And when recruiting, families were often much more effective at engaging families than the project team, none of whom had children themselves. This became a core feature of the programme – the invitation from families to other families had much greater validity and was much more attractive than an open call led by the project team.

Impact

An early evaluation of Family by Family suggests that the programme is contributing to positive outcomes and enabling families to meet some of their immediate goals. In February 2012 the programme expanded to a second location, Playford, (once some adjustments had been made to adapt the model for this new context). Ultimately the goal is to grow the model in locations throughout Australia.

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Participatory budgeting

Participatory budgeting directly involves citizens in making decisions about how public money should be spent. Usually, this means involving citizens in identifying spending priorities, making and voting on proposals about how to spend the budget, and then involving citizens in overseeing and evaluating how the money was spent. The practice emerged in the 1980s in Porto Alegre, Brazil and has since been adopted in many cities and regions around the world, albeit in very different forms.



Participatory Budgeting in Porto Alegre. Image courtesy of Ivo Gonçalves

Participatory Budgeting in Berlin-Lichtenberg

Most examples of participatory budgeting in Germany are quite different from the original Porto Alegre model. Indeed, many are more akin to traditional forms of public consultation, where the focus is on providing information to citizens and giving them some, limited opportunities to provide feedback and influence decisions. This is not however the case in Berlin-Lichtenberg which is now in its eighth year of participatory budgeting. Despite various legal constraints, this borough of East Berlin has tried to keep as true as possible to the spirit and principles of the Porto Alegre model. This process engages citizens from the outset – in developing proposals – before deliberating and then voting on these proposals. As such, Berlin-Lichtenberg is an example of the potential of participatory budgeting in Germany.

How does it work?

Berlin-Lichtenberg is a Borough of East Berlin with just over 260,000 residents. 6% of the local budget is used for the participatory budgeting process, which is now in its eighth year. The process is based on the idea that all citizens have the right to vote on and submit proposals for new services. Citizens are invited to submit proposals on the following themes: libraries, health, children and youth, culture, music schools, public roads, volunteering, services for the elderly, sports, environment and nature and economic development.⁹

Citizens can submit proposals online via the participatory budgeting portal or at residents meetings, which are open to all residents and held across the borough. They then have the opportunity to discuss and reflect on these proposals at the residents meeting and online. The borough administration collects and reviews all proposals and amends them where appropriate to make them ready for voting. Citizens can then vote for their favourite proposals either online or at the residents meeting. There is now a 'voting day' where all voting takes place. The borough also carry out a household survey - a randomised sample of the population are asked to vote on their favourite suggestions. Initially 5,000 residents were surveyed but in 2013 this number increased to 50,000. The final votes are then passed on to the co-ordination committee at the borough who carry out feasibility studies, assess the financial costs of the proposals, make a decision about which ones to implement and start the implementation process. The assembly is accountable for the final decisions and the implementation of projects. The monitoring committee, which consists of local residents, assembly members, councillors, civil servants and civil society representatives, is responsible for evaluating and improving the process.

Who participated and how?

⁹ For a full list see <http://www.buergerhaushalt-lichtenberg.de/thema> Sourced on 21st March 2013

In the first year of participatory budgeting in Berlin-Lichtenberg, roughly 4,000 people took part which was 1.6% of the local population. For the 2013 budget, almost 10,500 people have taken part (either online, via residents meeting, meetings on voting day or the household survey) which represents 4% of the local population.¹⁰ This marks a significant increase in participation over the last seven years. This growth in participation can be attributed to two main factors. First, the borough has provided three different ways in which people can contribute ideas and vote on proposals: online, via the household survey and at public meetings. This multi-media approach has been cited as a key factor in the success of participatory budgeting in Berlin-Lichtenberg. Indeed, in 2013, more than 6,000 people participated online and via the household survey. Second, the administration has made a concerted effort to engage groups which are usually under represented – in particular, families, young people and members of the Vietnamese and Russian communities.

Impact

Between 2005 and 2011 1,888 citizen proposals have been collected by the borough administration. Of these, 414 were presented to the borough assembly. Of these, 83 were rejected by the assembly but 331 have either been implemented or are in the process of being implemented. Research suggests that the process has been successful in increasing participation rates of under-represented groups, has helped to build social capital in the borough, has strengthened the problem solving capacity of the local community, and increased legitimacy and transparency of the budgeting process.¹¹

¹⁰ Daten und Fakten zum Bürgerhaushalt 2013. Available here: http://www.buergerhaushalt-lichtenberg.de/sites/default/files/files/info/04_2013_daten_und_fakten_bueha2013_endfassung.pdf.

Sourced on 22nd March 2013

¹¹ Conversation with Jochen Franzke 19th March 2013.

BENEFITS?

In an accompanying paper on case studies of citizen engagement in social innovation, we examine in detail a broad range of activities and methods of engagement.¹² Alongside the three methods summarised here, we also looked at peer research, citizen competitions and co-operative forms of governance. In the course of developing these case studies, we spoke to numerous practitioners about how they understood the value and benefits related to participatory activities. These included:

- New perspectives on and a better understanding of specific challenges
- Increased confidence and skills among participants
- Access to a greater diversity of ideas
- New and stronger networks and relationships for participants
- More appropriate and better targeted programmes and responses
- A sense of ownership over actions and decisions taken among participants

Alongside this empirical approach, we also looked at the literature within international development and public participation, where the concept of engagement has been studied most systematically. Reviewing this literature, we found that:

- Engagement activities which are designed to have specific outcomes (e.g. a greater sense of empowerment, greater confidence and self-esteem, community cohesion etc.), may well achieve those particular outcomes. However, this does not mean that all citizen engagement activities or that citizen engagement per se will always or can always expect these outcomes. If the engagement activity was not designed with a particular outcome in mind then it is unlikely that other benefits will be produced as an extra or additional benefit or as a by-product of the process.
- Participation activities cannot in themselves realise some of the ambitious goals set out by their proponents (such as a reduction in poverty, gender equality, accountability in government). The realisation of such goals depends on much more than the simple existence of various participatory activities. They will require changes in law, institutions, attitudes and norms.
- Whether or not a certain form of engagement will produce a particular benefit will depend entirely on the way it is practiced and the context in which it operates. For example, whether volunteering for a time bank will lead to greater skills and confidence will depend on how long a commitment this is, the opportunities for interaction with others and the qualities of those interactions and so on.
- There are few clear links between the practice of participation and the benefits it is supposed to deliver. And tracking the impact of participation is particularly challenging because many of its goals - such as 'empowerment' or 'social cohesion' - are often ill-defined and therefore difficult to measure or quantify.

¹² A Davies and J Simon, 'Citizen engagement in social innovation – a case study report'. A deliverable of the project: "The theoretical, empirical and policy foundations for building social innovation in Europe" (TEPSIE), European Commission – 7th Framework Programme, Brussels: European Commission, DG Research

RISKS

Citizen engagement can lead to negative outcomes. The positive potential outcomes of citizen engagement are frequently mirrored by potential harms.

A failure to sufficiently consider the context into which a participatory activity is introduced can result in unforeseen harms. At the root of this issue is the problem of viewing participation as a neutral technique, rather than an inherently political process. Disempowerment, reprisals, reinforcement of social hierarchies, and a lack of accountability and transparency are just some of the possible negative outcomes of participatory processes.

Here are some of the risks of citizen engagement:

- **Co-option:** It is important to take account of existing power structures within communities when planning participatory activities. Numerous studies have shown that where power asymmetries are deeply embedded, the risks are high that the process will be captured by local elites who will use the process to further their own interests rather than those of the local community more broadly. As such, participatory processes can reinforce rather than weaken existing power dynamics.
- **Self-exclusion:** Not everyone wants to take part in participatory processes. Others might feel that they can't or shouldn't take part. In developed contexts, self-perception and belief about one's own place and role in a community seem to be an important factor in determining whether someone wants to take part in participatory activities. In the UK and US, a large body of research attests to the fact that participants in every aspect of civic or associational life tend to be dominated by those who are already well-resourced – those with higher socio economic status, the well educated, employed and affluent.
- **Legitimacy:** When processes are co-opted by elite groups or vested interests, or where the process is not representative of the local community there may be concerns about the legitimacy of the process. There are also more fundamental concerns about the legitimacy of the decisions that may come out of a participatory process. People may be involved in an engagement activity as representatives of a larger group, but often they are not formally accountable to this group.
- **Risks of disengagement:** Poorly practiced forms of engagement can also create harm by making long term disengagement more likely. If it is true that citizen participation of various kinds can enhance the practice of democracy, as is often argued, then it is also true that negative experiences of participation can lead people to disengage even further. Disengagement, disillusionment, frustration, cynicism and consultation fatigue are well-documented outcomes of poorly conceived and executed engagement activities.

TO CONSIDER:

In view of the risks outlined above, it is important to think carefully about how best to use citizen engagement in developing new solutions to social challenges. With such a broad spectrum of possible activities, there can be no 'how to' guide for policymakers for supporting citizen engagement in social innovation. But there are a number of issues that policymakers, funders and practitioners must consider before advocating, funding or developing engagement activities.

What is the purpose of the engagement activity?

First, it is important to identify the purpose and function of the engagement activity – what are you trying to get out of this activity? How do you define success? Is this activity necessary in generating and sustaining the social innovation being developed? What are your key objectives? And why is engagement critical to fulfilling these? Too many engagement activities are undertaken without a clear answer to these questions.

Who do you want to engage?

Participation activities are not neutral techniques - they're inherently political processes. Who do you want to engage? What are the barriers to participation? How can people be incentivised to participate? What are the dynamics of the groups of citizens you want to work with? How likely are the risks of co-option? Practitioners need to be aware of the characteristics of the group of citizens that are being engaged in order to plan for and mitigate the risks of under-representation and co-option.

Can you tolerate uncertainty of outcomes?

In many cases, engagement activities will only be successful if citizens are genuinely able to shape the process and its outcomes. This means that practitioners, funders, policymakers and participants need to be comfortable with a certain amount of uncertainty and need to be open to the possibility of unexpected outcomes – both positive and negative.

Who is best placed to deliver this project or approach?

Activities that engage citizens often require considerable skills, expertise and knowledge to be delivered effectively. In most cases it will be important to find partners with experience working with citizens to meet your particular goals.

Do you have the resources to make engagement effective?

Finding ways to bring more citizens into the design or development of an initiative can often be a lengthy process. It will usually take time to build up necessary relationships that will facilitate valuable input from citizens. It's therefore important to consider whether you are able to invest the time and money needed over the medium to long term, to really benefit from the planned activity or project.

Can you manage stakeholders' expectations effectively?

When governments want to involve citizens in their activities, there is frequently a mismatch between the way they describe a project and the reality of what it will involve for citizens. Using terms like 'empowerment' or 'local-control' when citizens are simply taking part in consultation exercises is likely to raise expectations that cannot be met. 'Shallower' forms of engagement that involve individuals contributing information or opinions can be a major source of value to the development of social innovations, but they need to be described in a way that participants will recognise.

CONCLUSION

Over the last decade there has been a proliferation of methods and approaches to citizen engagement. From idea banks and competitions to crowdsourcing and co-design, governments, public services and businesses are increasingly keen to garner insights and information from citizens, service users and customers. In these contexts, the value of participation and engagement has arguably taken on the status of orthodoxy. Development projects that do not include a participatory element are frequently seen as unethical or invalid.¹³ And government projects are often seen as illegitimate if they do not include forms of citizen engagement such as consultations, surveys or citizen panels. Similarly, it has long been recognised in the fields of business and technology that you need to engage your customers and users to keep innovating.

In the field of social innovation there is a similar assumption: engaging people in developing new ways of tackling social challenges will lead to more effective and more legitimate solutions. Certainly, it seems inconceivable that we could develop any long term solution to any of the mounting economic, environmental or social challenges – such as youth unemployment, ageing societies, chronic disease or climate change – without the collaboration and engagement of citizens. Take the case of climate change, for example. This will require profound changes not simply in terms of new technologies but also in terms of human behaviour. We will need to cut energy use, conserve what is used through recycling and re-use and avoid production where possible rather than expanding it. This requires innovation on a vast scale. This kind of challenge requires solutions created ‘with’ and ‘by’ people rather than ‘for’ and ‘at’ them.

But we know from research in international development and public participation that there are significant risks and limitations associated with citizen engagement. Evidence of the benefits of participation for society and individuals is often patchy, and the value of engagement and participation tends to be contingent on the form and practice of that activity, the context in which it is performed, and the supporting structures around it. Not only that, but forms of engagement and participation also carry risks of generating additional harm, particularly when they are practiced in a way that does not take account of these contextual factors.

These conclusions mean we need to be ready to ask questions about the forms of engagement that are most appropriate to developing and sustaining social innovations, the specific outcomes they hope to achieve and any potential pitfalls we need to be aware of. This means breaking down the unwieldy concept of citizen engagement into something much more manageable, and analysing specific forms of citizen engagement. By doing this, we will build the knowledge base and be better able to support practitioners, participants and funders in developing urgently needed solutions to the most pressing social challenges we face today.

¹³ F Cleaver, ‘Paradoxes of participation: questioning participatory approaches to development’, in *Journal of International Development*, 1999, vol. 11, pp. 597-612

