

## **A PROGRAM OF PUBLIC DELIBERATIVE FORUNS IN BRAZIL – ACHIEVEMENTS AND FUTURE TRENDS.**

Jorge Edison RIBEIRO<sup>1</sup> and Vanessa Saboia ZAPP<sup>2</sup>

1 Universidade Estadual de Londrina  
Londrina, Paraná  
Brazil  
E-mail [jorge@uel.br](mailto:jorge@uel.br)

2 Universidade Estadual de Ponta Grossa  
Ponta Grossa, Paraná  
Brazil  
E-mail [ozappia@uol.com.br](mailto:ozappia@uol.com.br)

### ***Abstract***

The State Universities of Londrina and Ponta Grossa, Brazil are developing a program of public political participation through the promotion of citizen's deliberative forums. The main purpose of the program is to develop people's skills to work on relevant issues and make difficult choices together. The method used is largely based on the results of worldwide research by the Kettering Foundation, which has also provided technical support. Public talk is preceded by an extensive research of the issue at hand, with the production of support material, which brings up the different choices with their advantages and disadvantages, as well as the tensions between the choices. We have been using printed and video taped material, and we are soon to extend our methodology to the Internet. Politically, economically and culturally diverse communities tackled complex issues of local community relevance or nationwide interest. Results are highly encouraging and there are several other organizations interested in adopting the program.

### ***DEMOCRACY AND PUBLIC PARTICIPATION***

Modern democracy is facing a challenge. New technology and new forms of economic relations are contributing for the quick obsolescence of the traditional forms of government. The concept of citizenship is of increasing importance, as public action appears to be one of the most important characteristics of the new global paradigm. For the purpose of this work, public action means action taken by a group of people after deliberating on the available choices for the solution of common problems. It is the expression of full citizenship, and results from the development of an informed opinion that takes in full consideration all the tradeoffs involved in taking action to solve complex political problems. This must be distinguished from the traditional mass reactions, usually triggered by uncontrolled emotional unrest or deliberate misinformation. In many countries, mainly in the developing world, many factors inhibit public participation. Cultural heritage of excessively authoritarian regimens allied to an increasingly alienating working and living environment cause people to feel distant from each other, unidentified with their own communities and impotent in face of timely challenges. As a result the whole society suffers from an identity crisis characterized by passivity, conformity and conflicting behavior. Paradoxically, in the information age most people are uninformed, superinformed or pseudoinformed. These conditions, equally harmful, lead to ignorance of citizen's rights and block public action. Proper information is mandatory for full citizenship, but it is confined to a few. These few are not usually interested in the promotion of public action and citizen's participation.

In order to stimulate public participation in these conditions it is useful to create opportunities for people to recognize some of their individual problems as collectively relevant. This happens when the communication process is triggered among groups of people who share the same problem. Access to the correct and relevant information on the issue at hand allows people to weight the choices and to take public action. Deliberation, in this work, means the kind of public talk that leads people to make choices together in face of correct and

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complete information on the problem. The project "Citizens Forums" aims at the promotion of a method of public deliberation which will allow people to make decisions on complex political issues even in face of cultural and economical diversity existing in the community. Technological support helps to introduce the community based information in the talk, allowing deliberation to proceed.

## **A METHOD FOR PUBLIC DELIBERATION**

In this paper the word deliberation is used to mean a kind of talk that will lead a group of people to choose a course of action in complex situations. It requires objective examination of the possible choices, pondering on the information available so that the public is aware of the tradeoffs involved. Ideally the process will lead to the building of a public agenda on the issue being examined. It sounds like a straightforward process that can be performed by any group endowed with good meeting management skills. This is not so. Most political talks are characterized by a discussion where people try to defend rigid political positions dictated by party affiliation, religious denominations, etc. People who do not share the same views are seen as adversaries and their views are discarded without further consideration. The so-called political leaders mostly monopolize talks and most people are not heard at all. Social or personal values behind other people's thoughts are not considered. The discussions usually end in a vote. The participants are then either winners or losers. The losers will be reluctant to follow the winners. Common ground action or creative solutions are hardly a rule. Usually the resulting action will fail to engage most of the people. Most winners will consider their job done right after the vote and leave action for the political leaders. Losers are not compromised with the winning motion and will frequently oppose the resulting action. In face of this picture most people tend to discard participation in political activities and leave the so-called "politics" to the elected officials who are expected to solve all the problems. Political parties and partisan politics is certainly a fundamental feature of representative democracy and the vote is a most valuable democratic tool. But the political parties or the power of vote are not able to solve all the society's problems and most of the community problems. The level of public participation will set the differential feature between backwardness and progress in the modern democracies. But public participation need to be stimulated, especially in the many countries where public talk is dormant or has been repressed by authoritarian regimens. Citizens need a political space where they can develop the skills needed to make decisions together. A citizen's deliberative forum is one of these spaces. The forum is a moderated conversation on a relevant issue where action is required. The conversations go around the evaluation of the issue at hand and the various possible choices of actions. As a result it is expected that the community will build a public agenda for action on the analyzed issue. However, most of the work required of the research team happens before the actual forum takes place. When the forum focus on a local community issue the research team and community leaders engage in a process called *issue framing*, which is a process of research and analysis that will lead to the development of an *issue book*, a discussion guide to be used during the forums. When the forums focus a national interest issue the research team extensively investigates the subject and the resulting issue book is adjusted in meetings with various focus groups.

An issue book brings up a general information on the issue, along with the analysis of different choices available for public action. These choices are actually different pivotal lines to the discussion; each of them based on a different social value. It is important that all lines of thought are represented and that the main actions are grouped according to the subjacent social value. It must faithfully reflect the worries and thoughts found in the community or in the society at large. The language must be adequate to the target public who should connect to the issue presented. The discussion pivotal lines or choices of action must be organized in such a way as to show the tensions between the various ways of approaching the problem, exposing at the same time the positive and negative features of each choice. The issue book is printed or videotaped, but most frequently we have been using both forms.

It is fundamental that the information provided in the issue book and in the forum is precise and correct. This information will straiten possible distortions due to superinformation, subinformation and pseudoinformation. It will also allow citizens to know how much personal involvement is needed for effective action on the issue. Previous knowledge of future involvement in action will guarantee citizen's participation in the work that follows the forums even in face of predictable difficulties. It is therefore mandatory to provide correct information not only for the analysis and understanding of the problem, but also on the causes and consequences of each line of action.

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After the issue framing process the forum will gather a heterogeneous group of people who have previously received the issue book. During a previously established time this citizens will analyze the issue with the help of a neutral moderator. A simple set of rules is agreed upon: we listen to each other, everybody have equal right to speak, no one will dominate the talk, we will focus on the issue. Usually the forum starts with people talking about their personal experience in relation to the issue. As the forum proceeds people became aware that besides its personal/individual the problem also affects others, sometimes in a very different way. They begin to notice the values behind other people's opinions and to understand the collective dimension of the problem. This perception breaks the barrier of personal differences allow an effective communication process to be established. At this point on people will begin to work together toward a solution and at the same time became conscious of their role and the importance of their participation for the successful outcome of the ensuing public action. The most effective way to get these results is to work in small groups. In the end of the forum the groups exchange experiences, analyze the best lines of action and decide on a common agenda. Video technology has greatly facilitated the process. Using the same language as the widespread Television, videotaped information help people to overcome natural resistance to talk about complex issues in an unknown environment. The video has also helped the project to reach people of low educational standards or illiterates who could not use the printed issue book. The results with videotaped material brought us to consider more advanced methods as the use of multimedia resources and the Internet.

## ***PUBLIC DELIBERATIVE FORUMS - A BRAZILIAN PROGRAM***

Recent episodes in the Brazilian political history brought into scene the words ethics and citizenship as counterpoints to the corruption, the negligence and the neglect for citizen's social and economic rights which have been common features in elected governments all over the country. People's hope that a return to democratic order would bring forth, through the exercise of vote, a solution to the country's most pressing problems were frustrated by a succession of scandals, now widely commented in the media. A people tired of feeling powerless in face of overindulgence, left their homes and headed to the streets to fight for the right to be heard by those they have elected. And a disappointed people turned back to their daily routine when they realized their conquests had a sour taste as scandals went on.

Change is more than ever needed. Ethics in politics is a demand. Resistance has been created and indignation has been publicized. Citizenship became part of the national vocabulary, as a way of producing the transformations believed to be necessary. Despite the opinion of some office holders and intellectuals, the Brazilian people has also shown, even through some disorganized actions, that it did not lack civic values and the desire for freedom and justice. Elitist, demagogic and autocratic government decisions and actions have only made these feelings dormant. The need for participation is now being understood even by elected officials who are beginning to feel the need of public participation as an essential tool for the development of democracy. However, many questions remain to be answered. How can millions Brazilians, many of them excluded from the benefits of a well-structured society, fully exercise their citizenship? How can these people become aware of their rights and duties? How can they move forward? How can they overcome the feeling of powerlessness? How can they effectively act on their most pressing social, economical and cultural problems? These questions are the basic interest of the project "Citizen's Forums", jointly held by the State Universities of Londrina (UEL) and the State University of Ponta Grossa (UEPG), in the State of Paraná, Southern Brazil. Based on the methodology of the Kettering Foundation (Dayton, Ohio, USA), both universities work together to promote public deliberation.

The project aims at promoting citizen's deliberation on relevant issues in the regions of influence of the universities. An interdisciplinary team has been assembled in both universities. Faculty, staff and students participate in the team, which is responsible for all project actions.

The main line of the work was at first concentrated on the discussion of issues of general national interest. Our first action was to develop an issue book called "People and Politics: Who should govern?" a central issue for participatory democracy that had already been discussed in the United States. Research made in Brazil provided data on national feelings about the issue and the book was used in both Universities for the Citizens Forums project, involving 800 participants in 5 different cities. The issue book presents four choices and has related videotape. The video is also presented in four parts corresponding to the four choices presented, and each part takes no more than five minutes. The video shows brief presentations as well as images and interviews of ordinary people on the issue and its choices. It works as a kind of icebreaker for the start of the work in small groups and was designed taking into account the affinity of Brazilians with the

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television. The aim is to engage anyone interested in participating, but in some of the forums attendance was by invitation only, allowing the project team to control diversity. Number of participants also varied from 50 to 350 per forum. As initial discussions are always held in small groups of 10 people in average it became clear that a larger number of participants enriched the resulting agenda, despite increasing the degree of difficulty of the wrap up sessions. Each small group has a moderator who has been trained beforehand to be neutral and ensure that deliberation will occur. All attendants are required to fill up a form in which some personal data are required along with a survey on the views on the issue being analyzed. This survey is called a pre-forum ballot and will be compared with a similar survey done after the forum. Typical attendants are community leaders, students, rural and city workers, teachers, other professionals and unemployed. Supported by both Universities each forum has also private sponsors. The project can usually provide free enrolment and printed material. The Forums are held in a single day, usually taking the morning and the afternoon or the afternoon and part of the evening, generally on a Saturday, in order to meet the needs of the participants. As stated earlier, the aim of the project is to promote deliberation in order to trigger public action. The results of the forums, in these terms, are the proposed agendas for public action. The results of each forum are sent to local authorities and community leaders so as to provide a communication channel between the participants and the political leaders. This practice ensures that the government knows the public agenda and can thus choose to use its resources to help the communities to fulfill their needs. The project team is now developing a second issue of major national interest. The new issue book "How to improve the quality of our public schools?" has already been developed and its first edition was sponsored by the Latin American Democracy Network. New forums of national interest issues are to be held soon for the analysis of this issue.

A second line of work that is also being developed is the analysis of local community issues. Contrary to the first line in which the project team chooses the issues to be object of the forums, in this line of work the community chooses the issues to be treated in the forums. Usually the community finds out about the project during a national interest issue forum and then demands a specific issue to be treated according to their more pressing needs. The process involved is very similar. The issue book is produced with the help of community members and the subject is locally treated. On the point of view of short-term results, this kind of action is the most effective. Three issues have already been treated in this second line. The need for an education council in the city of Telemaco Borba, the development of an area of environment protection in the city of Pinhais and the problem of course quality for the students of the University of Ponta Grossa School of Law. There is no room for a detailed discussion of each of these actions in this paper, but the results were show effective and surprisingly quick actions. The interesting results of this work are becoming attracting other communities, which have requested similar programs. However, the project team cannot cope with at the demand and is planning to develop a training program that will allow the communities to acquire all the necessary skills to develop their own projects.

## ***DELIBERATION AND PUBLIC ACTION***

Pre-forum and post-forum ballots were instruments originally designed to evaluate the results of deliberative forums. The participants are asked the same set of questions before and after the deliberation process. The questions examine their general opinion on the issue and what aspects of the issue affect them the most. Examination of the results in terms of these ballots is not apparently encouraging. We could not find statistically significant changes in people's opinions on the issue. We could not detect significant change in the individual level. However, observation of citizens' and community's behavior after the forum, the agendas built in the deliberative process and action taken towards the solution of the problems show that the deliberative process is effective in stimulating public participation. Far from being a negative feature, the absence of significant difference in the pre and post forum ballots show that deliberation does not change people's mind about an issue, but change their attitude towards the issue and towards other people's opinions. The process of weighting the advantages and disadvantages of each proposed line of action show citizens that the solutions for complex problems always imply in tradeoffs.

When the issues are community based the results can be quickly noticed. In the city of Pinhais there is a community living in NA area of environmental protection. They are required by the government to observe the environmental law. But the government does not provide basic structure and do not enforce their basic rights as landowners. After the forums programs begun they have already created a n association to take care of their common needs, solved various problems of infrastructure along with the city government, fixed their property documents and tax situations and are still implementing the agenda drawn from the forums. The

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University of Ponta Grossa Law School had a high evasion rate. Students complained of poor classroom infrastructure and absence of motivating academic activities. After building NA action agenda, the students felt empowered to change the situation, beginning a citywide campaign involving University alumni and city lawyers. They were able to rebuild and refurbish their classrooms, improved the University's law library, and built a program of seminars, congresses, conferences and community services projects which are still going on one year after the main deliberative action.

In the case of the issues of national interest the results are expectedly less dramatic. However, the creation of new associations and the desire to follow the forums with community issues forums are a clue to the effect of project on the target public. The building of an agenda in this case is a more complicated process and public mobilization towards action in a national scale needs the collaboration of the media. We hope that the use of the Internet will be of help in bridging the gap between deliberation and public action in a wider scope.

## ***E-DELIBERATION?***

It is difficult to foresee the effect of the Internet in the process of deliberation. Citizen's forums seem to require physical closeness in order to trigger the deliberation process. Internet forums have a very different characteristic. However the Internet is the most democratic media space available. Besides being a media in which it is possible to choose the information wanted it also transforms any user in an information broadcaster if it is so desired. This makes it the ideal media for the building of an effective public agenda. With the increase in the number of freenets and the wider use of the networks by the general it is mandatory to create an Internet space that will allow a dynamic building of public agenda, triggered by the deliberative forums. This is the next goal of our project. Perhaps we could even devise a way of using the cold language of e-mails to produce e-deliberation.

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