

Why facilitators are necessary to ensure high-quality public deliberation in citizens' assemblies

*Democratic Audit has recently published several articles on the potential for [citizens' assemblies](#) to resolve entrenched political problems, in particular for [power-sharing](#) in Northern Ireland, but what is required to make such initiatives work? **Keisha Gani** argues that facilitators are vital to encourage deliberation and inclusion, which are both necessary for well-designed participatory democracy.*



Image: [geralt/Pixabay](#)

Facilitators: a crucial part of the deliberative process?

In citizens' assemblies – where a group of lay citizens are selected at random to come together to deliberate on questions of public policy – facilitators often play a vital role. They can build bridges between 'experts' who are called to give evidence and citizens to create an environment in which compromise can be reached. By keeping everyone on task, being impartial and managing differences to ensure the discussion is constructive, facilitators place the views of the electorate above the elected.

The role of a facilitator is typically taken on by public officials and civil servants, who are seen to possess authority thanks to their existing involvement in the political arena. Although the emerging industry of participation has produced consultants that act as facilitators, they are not necessarily better at assisting deliberative forums. [Iris Marion Young](#) argues that encouraging citizens to be facilitators can result in dialogue that promotes greater accountability and equal opportunity to influence deliberative outputs.

[Graham Smith](#) underscores that four key democratic goods can be realised through deliberation, namely: inclusion, popular control, considered judgement and transparency. He also outlines two institutional goods of efficiency and transferability, which evaluate the feasibility and operation of democratic innovations at a larger scale. As facilitators are a crucial part of the deliberative process, they are the key to realising many of Smith's ideals, particularly inclusion and considered judgement.

Inclusion: creating spaces

Facilitators can enable wider participation by giving individual citizens the space to contribute, by 'holding' the problem and creating structured engagement. By synthesising the views of others, facilitators can deal with complexity and simplify discussion. Anyone can be a facilitator, but what sets these individuals apart is their ability to mediate between the public and the political, enabling others to conduct high-quality deliberation.

An important aspect of inclusion is ensuring active deliberation by all participants, rather than just passive observation by some. For example, in the case of the mini publics created for the [British Columbia Citizens' Assembly](#) on electoral reform, the facilitators evaluated all viewpoints, and attempted to ensure that marginalised groups were not further excluded. However, they found that men often spoke more than women, highlighting the need to improve selection criteria to support facilitation. As deliberation can be conflictual in nature, facilitators must motivate citizen participation and foster interdependence, by decreasing tension and disagreement. Facilitators must ensure that the myriad voices involved in any deliberative forum are included.

Considered judgement: encouraging reflexivity

Considered judgement focuses on the process of participants learning from each other as they are involved in the process. Facilitators take the abstract positions held and create a '[critical consciousness](#)' to motivate individuals to consider other perspectives, in a process that develops collective decision-making. Responding to the [informational asymmetries](#) helps facilitators guide individuals from their positions, interests and values towards other perspectives. The ability of facilitators to promote collaboration and help participants develop a shared understanding of the issues at stake can be seen in democratic innovations such as [Porto Alegre's Participatory Budgeting](#) project.

Reflexivity is a key component of empowerment, where facilitators can help citizens become more aware of how their thoughts and actions develop. Deliberation treats citizen preferences as fluid, emphasising the ability of individuals to reflect and collaborate if they are well-informed. It is important not just to look at what individuals are thinking about, but also to address how and why they view things a certain way. As such, facilitators play a crucial role in nurturing deliberative dynamics to empower the public.

[Archon Fung](#) believes that trust is also an important component of the perceived legitimacy of facilitators. The importance of this was highlighted in the case of the [Sacramento Water Forum](#), where the participants chose a facilitator they felt comfortable with. Facilitators generate trust by encouraging dialogue to reach reflexivity, rather than merely being there to transmit information. This ensures authentic dialogue by allowing multiple voices and perspectives to be explored, as the focus is on building relationships rather than just producing results. It is particularly important for facilitators to be aware of top-down representative dynamics and be careful not to reinforce this.

Deliberation without facilitation – is it possible?

Deliberative processes without facilitators are not unheard of, in particular in the use of E-democracy, such as the [electronic participatory budgeting initiative in Iceland](#) that followed the economic crisis. Here there is no face-to-face exchange that requires mediation. However, these processes are not without their issues, as even – or perhaps especially – with online participation, the tendency is to have more disagreement than deliberation. Without facilitators, there may be more monologues and pre-packaged arguments that shut down or restrict inclusion and considered judgement.

As the goal is to reach agreement or a deeper understanding of the issue being discussed, the facilitator's presence is pivotal in creating an environment that fosters deliberative dynamics. Graham Smith's democratic goods of popular control and transparency may be realised without facilitators, but their assistance plays a vital role in the realisation of considered judgement and is at the heart of inclusiveness, making deliberation more efficient and transferable to a variety of situations. Even if diversity is ensured, facilitators must be present to foster interdependence and authentic dialogue, by giving all participants equal opportunity to contribute. Giving citizens the space to collaborate and engage in reflexivity is an essential part of facilitation, and should remain a key priority of deliberative democracy.

This post represents the views of the author and not those of Democratic Audit. The author would like acknowledge Dr Oliver Escobar and his course "Public Participation in Democracy and Governance" (University of Edinburgh).

About the author



Keisha Gani is currently undertaking an MSc in Health Policy at the University of Edinburgh.

Similar Posts

- [How to design deliberative democratic assemblies in an inclusive way: a recommendation for policy-makers](#)
- [Deliberative democracy could be used to combat fake news – but only if it operates offline](#)
- [NHS Citizen and what it tells us about designing democratic innovations as deliberative systems](#)
- [It's time to change election campaign law to stop politicians lying](#)
- [Improving access to information and restoring the public's faith in democracy through deliberative institutions](#)