

What is a Deliberative Process?

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Public policies of various governmental sectors can influence, directly or indirectly, the health of the population. Whether they be policies related to transportation, environment, income, education, child-care, or social housing, these can all impact the determinants of health. As a consequence, decision makers are increasingly being called to adopt healthy public policies; that is, policies which have integrated a preoccupation with population health.

However, adopting healthy public policies is complex. On the one hand, there are many uncertainties as to the potential effects of specific policies on health. On the other, there is often no consensus among civil society, experts and decision makers, as to which policies should be privileged. Indeed, the different actors who will be affected by the policies may have divergent points of view based on their values, needs, preferences, and interests. Thus, decision makers are often stuck in gray zones within which it is difficult to manoeuvre (Callon, Lascoumes et Barthe, 2001).

In recent years, there has been an increased interest in the use of deliberative processes as a way of informing decision making. This information sheet is an introduction to that subject. It offers a definition of "deliberation" and "deliberative process". It also gives a brief overview of two major approaches to deliberation as well as a few concrete examples.

A Definition

"Deliberation" is defined as the critical examination of an issue involving the weighing of reasons for and against a course of action. Deliberation can involve a single individual, but the deliberative processes under discussion here involve group deliberation. Thus, we define a "deliberative process" as a process allowing a group of actors to receive and exchange information, to critically examine an issue, and to come to an agreement which will inform decision making (Fearon, 1998).

Two Deliberative Trends

Two deliberative trends are relevant to public policy (Figure 1). Within the first trend, deliberative processes are viewed as tools of democratic governance. Emphasis is generally placed on the participation of civil society in government decision making (e.g. to define a problem, identify priorities, allocate resources or evaluate the implications of various policy options). Deliberation thus promotes not only conciliation between the various actors affected by a policy, the emergence of an informed and engaged public, and the taking into account of the public's perspective, but also transparency, legitimacy and accountability in decision making (Sintomer and Blondiaux, 2002; Lomas et al., 2005). Within the second trend, deliberative

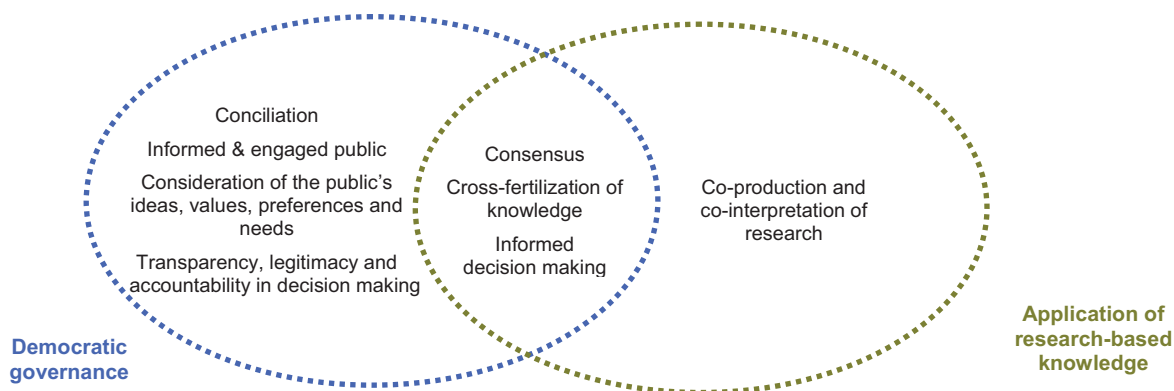


Figure 1 Objectives of two deliberative trends



processes are viewed as tools for promoting the use of research-based knowledge to guide decision making. Interest in this trend has grown alongside the movement to promote evidence-informed policy making. Such deliberative processes focus on the participation of experts and decision makers and are aimed at building bridges between the worlds of research and policy making. Thus, deliberation allows for the co-production and co-interpretation of research, while taking into account the decisional context (Abelson et al., 2003).

Despite the noteworthy differences between these trends, it is interesting to note their points of

convergence. Indeed, both trends affirm the ability of deliberation to promote consensus among various actors, to build knowledge based on the cross-fertilization of knowledge and to inform decision making.

Examples

A review of Canadian and international experiences results in the identification of a multitude of mechanisms that promote deliberation. We propose here three examples promoting democratic governance and three promoting the application of research-based knowledge (Table 1).

Table 1 Six examples of deliberative processes

<i>Democratic governance</i>	<i>Application of research-based knowledge</i>
The CPRN's citizens' dialogues – Canada Since the late 1990's the Canadian Policy Research Networks have undertaken a number of initiatives aimed at encouraging public deliberation about various policy issues (e.g. the Ontario 2004-2008 budget strategy, the future of Canadian health care, the use of personal information, Canadian public health priorities). For more information: www.cprn.org [FR/EN]	The CHSRF synthesis program – Canada The Canadian Health Services Research Foundation recently established a decision support synthesis program. This program involves the use of a deliberative process that brings together researchers and decision makers for the purpose of defining a problem, establishing the scope of relevant research, interpreting results and formulating recommendations. For more information: www.chsrf.ca [FR/EN]
The NICE Citizens Council – United Kingdom Since 2002, the National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence has been consulting a council made up of 30 citizens drawn from all walks of life. The mandate of the Citizens Council is to deliberate on the social and ethical issues that guide NICE's work and recommendations. For more information: www.nice.org.uk [EN]	Consensus Development Conferences – Canada Inspired by the National Institutes of Health in the United States, the Institute of Health Economics in Alberta has, for the past several years, been organizing consensus conferences where a panel of experts evaluates the scientific literature related to a political or scientific issue, hears testimonies and formulates recommendations useful for policy makers, health professionals and members of the public. For more information: www.ihe.ca [EN]
National Issues Forums – United States National Issues Forums is a non-partisan network established during the 1980s. Its mandate is to support the creation of forums that allow for public deliberation on public policy issues (e.g. health, immigration, social security). For more information: www.nifi.org [EN]	IDEAHealth – Khon Kaen, Thailand IDEAHealth was an international dialogue sponsored by the World Health Organization that took place between December 13 and 16, 2006. It allowed decision makers, experts and other stakeholders to share their ideas and experiences and to consider the results of systematic reviews in an attempt to find concrete solutions to problems confronting developing countries. For more information: www.who.int/rpc/meetings/ideahealth/en [EN]

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