

Deliberative processes such as citizens' juries, consensus conferences, or deliberative polls are increasingly used to engage citizens and stakeholders about challenging public health issues for the purposes of informing policy-making (Abelson, 2009; Scutchfield, Hall, & Ireson, 2006). Yet, there is a paucity of research evidence about the effectiveness of deliberative processes in real settings (Culyer & Lomas, 2006; Mendelberg, 2002).

DEFINITION: A "deliberative process" is a process that allows a group of actors to receive and exchange information, to critically examine an issue, and to arrive at an agreement that informs decision making.

The purpose of this fact sheet is to introduce public health practitioners to the evaluation of deliberative processes, specifically:

- Why should we evaluate deliberative processes?
- What should be the focus of an evaluation?
- What are the different evaluative approaches? and
- What contextual factors matter when evaluating deliberative processes?

Finally, the fact sheet presents three frameworks that could be relevant to supporting more effective evaluative practices.

Why Evaluate?

The four main reasons for evaluating deliberative processes are:

- (i) To ensure the proper use of public or institutional resources;
- (ii) To determine whether the process works and to learn from past experiences;
- (iii) To determine whether or not the process was fair (e.g. that the views of participants were accurately represented); and

- (iv) To better understand which deliberative process is effective for different types of issues and contexts (Abelson & Gauvin, 2006).

What to Evaluate?

The focus of the evaluation can be the process and/or the outcome(s) of the deliberative process (Abelson & Gauvin, 2006). A *process evaluation* allows you to explore how the deliberative process was implemented and what problems were experienced. Such evaluation is particularly useful for monitoring the implementation of a deliberative process or identifying changes to improve it. For example, you may be interested in evaluating whether a deliberative process was conducted in an unbiased way, or evaluating whether participants had access to the appropriate resources to enable them to deliberate meaningfully.

On the other hand, an *outcome evaluation* allows you to measure changes in specific outcomes, as well as to establish whether or not a deliberative process was effective in causing the intended changes. Such evaluation can only be undertaken if the intended changes are clearly stated, there are appropriate measures to track such changes, and there are valid and reliable mechanisms to collect data about these changes. For example, you may be interested in measuring changes in the participants (e.g., Did the deliberative process increase the participants' knowledge, capacity for future deliberation, or level of trust in policy-makers?). You may also be interested in measuring changes in the policy-making process (e.g., Did the deliberative process lead to a consensual, responsive, and efficient decision?).



What Evaluative Approaches?

Evaluators can adopt three different approaches to evaluate deliberative processes:

- (i) **User-based evaluations** – such evaluations take into consideration the views of the different actors (e.g. participants, staff, decision makers) who may use different criteria to evaluate a deliberative process;
- (ii) **Theory-based evaluations** – such evaluations rely on criteria that are based on deliberative theories and models; and
- (iii) **Goal-free evaluations** – such evaluations are not constrained by any predetermined theory or criteria, and focus on actual rather than intended outcomes (Chess, 2000).

The evaluation approach that you will use should be tailored to some key considerations (e.g. For what purposes is the evaluation being done? Who is the audience for this evaluation? What data source could inform this evaluation? How can data be collected in a reasonable fashion? What resources are available to conduct the evaluation?)

Whatever approach is selected, several methods can be used to collect data during the evaluation of a deliberative process ranging from self-administered questionnaires, surveys, interviews, focus groups, non-participant observation, and document review.

What Contextual Factors Matter?

It is important to realize that a deliberative process is highly context-driven (Abelson & Gauvin, 2006). The community context, the political context, the decision-making context, and the organizational context can have, independently or in interaction with each other, positive or negative consequences on a deliberative process (Delli Carpini, Cook, & Jacobs, 2004). Thus, evaluators must consider the context in which the deliberations occur in order to conduct valid evaluations.



Figure 1 The importance of contextual factors

Adapted from Abelson and Gauvin (2006).

Three Evaluative Frameworks

In the following section, we introduce three frameworks that could be relevant to supporting more effective evaluative practices. The first framework, developed by Gene Rowe and Lynn Frewer (2004), is one of the most frequently cited in the literature. The framework identifies a set of nine criteria that are considered necessary for a process to be “effective” (Table 1). Based on these criteria, the authors developed a toolkit comprising: (i) a 58-item questionnaire intended for participants; and (ii) a checklist intended for evaluators who observe the deliberative process.

Table 1 Frewer and Rowe’s Nine Evaluative Criteria

<p>Representativeness: the public involved should comprise a broadly representative sample of the population affected by the decision</p> <p>Independence: the process should be conducted in an unbiased way</p> <p>Early involvement: the participants should be involved as early as possible in the process</p> <p>Influence: the outcome of the process should have a genuine impact on policy decisions</p> <p>Transparency: the process should be transparent so that relevant/affected population can see what is going on and how decisions are made</p> <p>Resource accessibility: participants should have access to the appropriate resources to enable them to deliberate meaningfully</p> <p>Task definition: the nature and scope of the exercise should be clearly defined</p> <p>Structured decision making: the process should use appropriate mechanisms for structuring and displaying the decision-making process</p> <p>Cost-effectiveness: the process should be cost-effective from the point of view of the sponsors</p>
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Source: Frewer & Rowe (2005).

This framework is based on a review of criteria used to evaluate the success of deliberative processes. In addition, the framework remains flexible to allow generic and tailored evaluations. However, the framework pays limited attention to the outcomes of a deliberative process and may be more useful to evaluators interested in process evaluations. To access the framework, see Frewer and Rowe (2005).

The second example is a framework that focuses solely on assessing the quality of deliberation. Developed by De Vries et al. (2010), this framework identifies four dimensions of the quality of deliberation: (i) equal participation by all participants; (ii) respect for the opinions of others; (iii) a willingness to adopt a societal perspective on the issue in question, rather than focusing on what is best for participants as individuals; and (iv) reasoned justification of one’s positions. The authors rely on both qualitative and quantitative methods to conduct the evaluation (e.g. analysis of the transcriptions of the deliberations and survey

data). Although the authors acknowledge that some dimensions remain difficult to measure, this evaluative framework constitutes a promising initiative to uncover what actually happens during deliberations. To access the framework, see De Vries et al. (2010).

A third example is the framework developed to evaluate the dialogues organized by the McMaster Health Forum. It is based on the *Planned Behaviour* model. Developed by John N. Lavis and his colleagues (2009), the framework identifies twelve features of every dialogue organized by the McMaster Health Forum. A first questionnaire asks participants to evaluate how useful they find each feature of the dialogue (e.g., the dialogue brings together many parties who would be involved in, or affected by, future decisions related to the issue; the dialogue did not aim at consensus, etc.). In addition, a brief follow-up questionnaire is sent to participants six months later to assess how the dialogue influenced their attitudes, norms, beliefs, intentions, and behaviours.

This framework was developed specifically to evaluate dialogues organized by the McMaster Health Forum. Thus, it may be less flexible than Rowe and Frewer’s or De Vries et al.’s frameworks when applied to other types of deliberative processes. However, the framework developed by Lavis and his colleagues can provide great insights to evaluators interested in evaluating the impact of the deliberations on participants over time and not just how it was conducted. To access the framework, see Lavis (2010).

Moving Forward

Evaluating deliberative processes is fraught with conceptual and methodological challenges. Yet, there has been some progress in recent years toward the development of evaluative frameworks, as well as innovative research-practice partnerships that can generate valuable expertise and resources. Public health practitioners can benefit from nurturing such partnerships with researchers to build their own capacity to organize and evaluate deliberative processes.

The National Collaborating Centre for Healthy Public Policy and deliberative processes

The National Collaborating Centre for Healthy Public Policy (NCCHPP) seeks to increase the expertise of public health actors across Canada in healthy public policy through the development, sharing and use of knowledge. The NCCHPP is developing documents to support the use of deliberative practices in Canada, but also to stimulate further reflection in this promising field of practice for public health.

To access these resources, please visit our website at: <http://www.ncchpp.ca> [EN/FR].

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