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This dates from the weeks just before the first pandemic lockdown, when there was a groundswell of enthusiasm for Citizens Panels. Virtual versions took place online, but as social distancing disappears they are resuming – especially on issues such as climate change. It's therefore important to review their role and this article seems just as relevant

February 2020

Citizens' Assemblies – the best form of co-production?

Citizens' Assemblies have become extraordinarily popular. And rightly so. Trust in elected bodies – Parliamentary or Municipal is at a low ebb. Campaigners for causes like social care, public transport or climate change believe that politicians just cannot deliver. And, it's a wonderful way to respond to growing public expectations for greater participation – fuelled no doubt by the online culture and, of course, social media.

But there are also downsides. The notion that 50-100 people selected, no matter how sophisticated a 'sortation' method is used, can be as legitimate as those who have been elected sounds counter-intuitive to many. Then there is concern about what they are told – and is it biased? How did they decide? Who is accountable if it all goes wrong? And the cost? Doing it properly needs a big budget – maybe £60,000 - £80,000. What other citizen involvement could you undertake with that amount of money?

That said, what seems self-evident is that **Citizens Assemblies** cannot be wholly standalone. They will play a part in an overall approach to public involvement – one that reflects an organisation's objectives and culture. What also seems true is that there will be few occasions where the ultimate power of decision will be delegated to an Assembly. More typically they will be asked to develop ideas and make recommendations. That clearly makes Assemblies primarily a method of consultation.

But they are such a powerful method. Their strength lies in their role in helping attendees get to grips with the issues and the use of high-quality deliberative methods to reach for a consensus, if possible. They rely on several distinct phases – the first of which is often called *Learning*, and requires careful and sensitive selection of those to provide evidence. Unless there is controversy or the need for difficult trade-offs, there is little purpose in an Assembly, but with such characteristics comes the challenge of providing unbiased information. The recommended solution to this is to appoint an Advisory Committee to select the 'witnesses'. It is also possible to invite Assembly members to suggest their own preferred sources of information. There can also be arrangements to invite other stakeholders to make submissions. *Deliberation* comes next. It can take many sessions. The commitment is considerable.

All this will surely produce significant and hopefully representative conclusions. Or so the advocates of **Citizens' Assemblies** maintain. Let us hope they are right; time will tell. It's the '*What Happens Next*' question that matters. And here there is a strong case for requiring their recommendations to go to a full public consultation – so that the entire community can have its say on potentially contentious proposals before they are implemented. We know that many agree with this approach.

Once one acknowledges that the issues are ultimately destined for a public consultation, it is easy to see a **Citizens' Assembly** as the best possible co-production method at the pre-consultation stage. Consider the advantages over more conventional co-production:-

- Typically, co-design or co-development proceeds once the big decisions have been taken – or to use the jargon, once the question has been 'framed'. **Citizens' Assemblies** on the other hand, are often invited to think about the big issues rather than dive into the detail.
- Those involved in co-production are often enthusiastic existing customers, passengers, tenants or patients. Their involvement is valuable but can be highly unrepresentative of the wider pool of similar people. A more structured Assembly can address this bias.
- There is often a problem finding co-production teams that are sufficiently inclusive. A well-designed Assembly increases the chances of minority voices being heard.
- The scale, timescale and budget of an Assembly provides the resources that other co-production exercises rarely obtain. Add professional facilitation and you have more help to ensure everyone's perspective is taken into account.

A possible problem is that co-production will be more visible and subject to scrutiny. It is therefore so important that Assemblies are never just public relations events. They must conform to minimum standards, but these are yet to emerge. **Involve** has, commendably initiated a discussion on draft standards and we are keen to encourage our members to contribute to the paper it published last November. In addition, there may be a case for introducing an independent Quality Assurance much as the Institute currently provides for major public consultations. This will especially apply where an Assembly is an integral part of a pre-consultation.

For the trick is to convince a sceptical public that these enhancements to our democracy are for real. It would be a tragedy if new innovations developed just because of a lack of trust in our existing institutions were also to fail to earn the support of communities and be seen as yet another case of '*going through the motions*'