

## **A Brief Introduction to Dialogue Processes**

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Engaging with stakeholders and getting their high quality attention and comment has never been harder to achieve. Many key stakeholders and communities have grown disillusioned of consultation activities that asked too much, felt insincere and superficial, or were just too inflexible, leaving participants' biggest concerns "outside the scope of the current process".

The bleak consultation environment has led to the development of more effective alternatives to draw in stakeholders and increase the helpfulness of their input and these Dialogue Processes, as they are known, are becoming increasingly widespread. So, what are Dialogue Processes and why are they being used?

### **What are Dialogue Processes?**

While there are many different types of Dialogue Processes, two fundamental elements are common to all: deliberation and inclusion. Deliberation refers to the careful consideration of evidence, social interaction, discussion and debate, consideration of a range of views, and the opportunity to re-evaluate initial positions. Inclusion is about the involvement of a diverse range of individuals and groups, including previously excluded groups who are not represented in the normal stakeholder discussions. These two elements are present in all Dialogue Processes, although the emphasis on one or the other aspect, and how participants are engaged in the processes can vary enormously. Consensus conferences, citizen's juries, charettes and public hearings are some of terms developed to convey the different styles of processes that exist.

### **Why use Dialogue Processes?**

The many different arguments put forward for using community dialogue processes can be gathered under three key themes: *citizens' rights-based reasons; quality-based reasons; and, acceptance-based reasons.*

Citizens' rights-based reasons draw strength from broader concepts of democracy and the right of the community to be involved in processes affecting them. Quality-based reasons infer that the quality of the information gathered, and the decisions made, will be higher if

the community is involved in the processes. Acceptance-based reasons argue that processes that engage affected communities in decision-making will be seen as more legitimate and therefore easier to implement successfully. On many occasions, all three arguments are offered as a comprehensive rationale for using a dialogue process.

### **A working definition for Dialogue Processes**

So rich dialogue processes can be defined as: *specifically designed processes at the community level (rather than government and institutional) that involve both deliberation and inclusion and are based on the belief that such inclusion is a citizen's right, may improve the accuracy of decision making and/or may assist in the community's acceptance of decisions.*