

**Dialogue and Deliberation
for Civic Engagement
in Chicago: Building a
Community of Practice**

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November 2012

Dialogue and Deliberation for Civic Engagement in Chicago: Building a Community of Practice

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Institute for Policy and Civic Engagement (IPCE) at the University of Illinois at Chicago (UIC) is exploring how it might best help broaden and deepen the engagement of Chicago-area residents in public policy and community issues – particularly at the neighborhood, city, and county levels. It is interested in understanding how processes involving dialogue and deliberation might support this goal and the opportunities that might exist to further develop them. IPCE commissioned this report specifically to better understand the kinds of organizations that engage in dialogue and/or deliberation, the methods they use, the rationale behind those methods, and the results of their work. In addition, the report sought to identify local support services for this work (e.g., training, funding, public spaces), as well as laws and regulations governing its use.

This report is motivated by three purposes 1) to provide a survey or a 'lay of the land' of the dialogue and deliberation field: the who, what, and how of dialogue and deliberation in Chicago; 2) to create a resource for dialogue and deliberation organizations and practitioners as a first step of building a dialogue and deliberation community of practice in Chicago; and 3) to inform IPCE about the role it can play in supporting and promoting dialogue and deliberation in Chicago. The hope is that this report will inform, stimulate further discussion, and potentially encourage cooperation among local dialogue and deliberation practitioners, sponsors, conveners, and other interested parties.

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This scan began with a review of literature in both online and traditional academic journals, and books by leading academics. In June of 2012, IPCE hosted an exploratory group discussion among 10 local dialogue and deliberation practitioners and academics to provide guidance for the scan. This was followed by 38 individual interviews of facilitators, consultants, funders, planners, community organizers, educators, researchers, journalists, librarians, software designers, government watchdogs, lawyers, and civil servants involved in dialogue and deliberation in Chicago. Interviewees were asked about specific projects, methodologies, training, laws, challenges, engaging marginalized communities, local issues ripe for dialogue and deliberation, and especially how IPCE could support this work.

THE CURRENT STATE OF DIALOGUE AND DELIBERATION IN CHICAGO

It is easy to think that little meaningful dialogue and deliberation happens in Chicago with residents on community or public policy issues. Historically, change efforts in Chicago have been based on successful organizing and protest leading to change. Yet, this in-depth investigation unearthed a wide range of dialogue and deliberation initiatives throughout the city. Our findings discovered most were unaware of each other's existence. Even fewer knew that a large and growing national (and international) community of practice exists to support this work, much of which seeks to revitalize local community by empowering citizens to develop wiser, more inclusive and ultimately more sustainable solutions to their needs.

While it is encouraging to see so many efforts, their isolation makes them vulnerable and limits the growth and spread of dialogue and deliberation efforts. Currently there is no entity in the city that is supporting the widespread adoption of these approaches, nor is there an entity making the case for their use to government, funders and community organizations. Before exploring what could help a real culture of dialogue and deliberation among residents to blossom in Chicago, it is useful to first take a closer look at what exists now.

The National Coalition for Dialogue and Deliberation (NCDD) has synthesized dialogue and deliberation methodologies into four engagement streams, based on their purpose: 1) exploration, 2) decision-making, 3) collaborative action, and 4) conflict transformation. While this framework was designed to organize methodologies not organizations, and the same organization can and often does use methods from different streams, it is a useful way to understand the wide range of initiatives in Chicago.

Exploratory approaches encourage residents to learn more about themselves, their community and/or an issue. They use storytelling, questions, art, etc. to explore complex issues and enhance mutual understanding, not to reach agreement. By teaching skills in respectful listening and considering diverse viewpoints, they help build the foundations upon which vibrant communities can take shape and democracies function. This is perhaps the most developed and widespread use of dialogue and deliberation in the city, used by local artists, public media, cultural museums, humanities councils, libraries, popular educators, service organizations, and professional groups. Key local groups active in this stream include the Illinois Humanities

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Council Project on Civic Reflection, Chicago Cultural Alliance, and WBEZ, along with hundreds of small arts and culture initiatives, entrepreneurial public dialogue efforts, library discussions, and more. It nevertheless still has plenty of room to grow and spread into new topics, organizations, and communities. As residents participate in such dialogues, their desire for these approaches only seems to intensify. They also serve as good practice examples for others who engage the public.

Decision-making processes seek to influence public decisions and public policy and to improve public knowledge on topics such as public education, policing, the environment, transportation, housing, fiscal policy, and economic development. They tend to be deliberative and strive for consensus. Many of these processes are required by law, particularly those tied to federal funding. Unfortunately, both the governmental structures and political culture of Chicago, Cook County, and Illinois make meaningful public engagement challenging – i.e., the unusually large number of units of government, extraordinarily high levels of political corruption, powerful party “machine” politics, a history of limited public consultation, and the strong mayor/weak council political structure. Despite this, there has been meaningful public engagement in decision-making at a small scale, primarily at the city ward level, in suburban communities, within planning and technical expert organizations, and by civic educators.

Both Chicago Mayor Emanuel and Cook County Board President Preckwinkle talk about the importance of engaging residents and have convened gatherings of organizational stakeholders to obtain policy guidance. Efforts among ordinary residents so far, though, have been limited to information sharing and gathering input, with limited two-way dialogue or deliberation. Many city plans are developed with no public input or poorly designed processes. However, the recent Chicago Cultural Plan consultation stood out as unusually effective at generating public involvement, perhaps inspired by local projects from the “exploratory” stream. The most meaningful city innovations, however, have been at the ward-level, from 1970s experiments with participatory neighborhood governance to the recent adoption of participatory budgeting in four wards, as well as recent efforts by multiple aldermen to seek resident involvement in ward master plans, participatory town halls, and a new ward council. In the suburbs, communities like Woodridge and Warrenville trained officials to lead participatory town halls, and Elgin used public deliberations to develop new solutions to its budgetary woes.

Much of the local expertise and interest in deliberative public engagement in decision-making is concentrated in planning and technical expert organizations and among civic educators. Groups such as the Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning (CMAP), Metropolitan Planning Council, and Center for Neighborhood Technology regularly engage the public via deliberative processes to provide guidance on transportation, watershed management, economic development, etc. Surprisingly, some of the liveliest local public policy deliberations happen in high schools affiliated with the Illinois Democracy Schools, action civics youth groups such as Mikva Challenge, and in colleges and universities as part of fulfilling their civic mission.

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Although the “decision-making” stream is the least developed in the city, it has the greatest potential for growth and improvement. Multiple crises such as shrinking government budgets, rampant crime, public education failures, climate change, and economic stress are converging to make innovation in government that thoughtfully and meaningfully engages the public a necessity. In particular, the current policy debate focusing on privatizing public services and infrastructure to solve budgetary challenges could be transformed into one that explores how government, residents, and community-based organizations work together to “co-create” services, infrastructure, and solutions – thus rethinking the roles and responsibilities of each party.

Participatory budgeting is already providing one local example of new roles for residents and government. The process engages citizens directly in allocating funds from Chicago Aldermen discretionary funds. Alderman Joe Moore of the 49th ward has used the process since 2009. The Participatory Budget Project, a non-profit based in New York, has partnered with the UIC Great Cities Institute and IPCE to support the use of participatory budgeting in four other Chicago wards. Participatory budgeting could be supported and built upon to introduce other kinds of public engagement innovations. There are plenty of opportunities to improve the quality of public participation in public meetings and planning consultations – from skills training to modifying laws to enhancing opportunities for public comment to developing new forms of public engagement.

Collaborative Action processes empower groups and individuals to solve complicated problems and take responsibility for solutions. They are used in Chicago by a variety of groups, from businesses to faith communities. Chicago’s legacy as the birthplace and “flame-keeper” of community organizing helps shape the use of collaborative action in the city. .

Since more residents in Chicago than perhaps any other American city are connected to at least one community-based organization, they have become the gateways to residents for most groups using public dialogue and deliberation. This can simplify logistics and reduce costs, facilitate cooperation with culturally diverse populations, and enhance impact as groups publicize outcomes and sometimes move into action. At the same time, these organizations can also face limitations such as: a limited diversity of perspectives; becoming defenders of the status quo; refusing to cooperate on projects with “rivals”; or simply experiencing ‘burn- out’ on frequent consultations. There is growing interest in experimenting with alternative methods of reaching the public, as well as involving groups in issues outside their traditional interest areas. Community-based organizations themselves engage residents in dialogue and deliberation for their own purposes such as community “pulse taking,” visioning, and recruiting community leaders. However, most rely on some version of traditional one-on-one interviews filtered through community leaders. Collaborative group processes tend to take place infrequently, rarely last long, and move quickly from exploring issues to action planning and mobilization. In some cases, they only happen among small groups of leaders. However, some local

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community-based organizations have experimented with more involved group processes, from Appreciative Inquiry to 21st Century Town Hall Meetings to Future Search type visioning to community world cafes and restorative practice circles. A few innovative groups such as Community Organizing and Family Issues (COFI) integrate them throughout all their work.

The relationship between dialogue, deliberation, and social action can be particularly problematic for local community organizers, whose goal is concrete positive change. Community dialogue has been misused by local government in some communities to avoid taking action or has been associated with theoretical discussion or government “listening sessions” that clarify issues but don’t change anything. Similarly, although community-based organizations and local government need each other to serve communities, the roles, missions, powers, and expectations of each party can conflict and derail joint processes. The watchdog role of a community organization can conflict with that of dialogue facilitator, as happened with the community crime organization Chicago Alliance for Neighborhood Safety (CANS) in the 1990s. Joint community planning processes between resident groups and government have backfired when government failed to implement plans.

This problem has been avoided by initiating plans at the grassroots level and then only later seeking government support, as with the LISC New Communities Program quality of life plans. COFI has however managed to work cooperatively with government to develop and implement solutions that combine community wisdom, passion, and commitment with government resources. These kinds of efforts represent a significant opportunity for dialogue and deliberation in Chicago. Given its history, Chicago is perhaps the ideal place to bring together the strengths of traditional community organizing (action, mobilization, and community commitment) and the strengths of dialogue and deliberation (working with complex and interconnected issues, thinking collectively, integrating diverse perspectives). Although a few innovative community organizers like COFI are already doing this, there is clearly room for more.

Conflict Transformation processes are used to resolve conflicts, foster personal healing, and improve relationships between groups. They use “exploratory” style approaches to discuss divisive or sensitive topics, sometimes in potentially explosive situations. They can help unblock impasses to meaningful action and resolve conflicts to the benefit of all. In the city and especially suburbs of Chicago, community discussions of many important public policy issues, such as education, housing, and fiscal policy, can be tinged with undertones of racism – often linked to or used as a surrogate for the effects of income inequality. Race dialogues have thus been used, especially in suburbs such as Evanston, to help unblock race-related conflicts preventing important public policy decisions. Alarmed by incivility in nationwide public discourse, the Chicago-based American Bar Association adopted a Resolution to Promote Civil Discourse to promote respectful civic dialogue through its membership and outside groups. It has put this into practice through conferences, publications, and public events, some in Chicago or including local experts. Restorative justice, however, is perhaps the most exciting and fastest growing use

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in Chicago and Cook County of dialogue to transform conflict. It is an approach to justice, which uses dialogue to thoughtfully consider and develop customized responses that meet the needs of all parties. Part of Illinois law, it has been used especially successfully in youth and family law. Restorative practices are now being extended into public schools, public housing, and faith communities. It therefore represents perhaps the most promising local example of embedding dialogue and deliberation in how communities solve problems. As such, it could potentially be a model for meeting other local community needs.

SUPPORT FOR DIALOGUE AND DELIBERATION IN CHICAGO

If local public dialogue and deliberation initiatives are to be sustained as well as spread and grow, they need local support services and resources – such as training and consulting, communities of practice, technology, funding, and research. Currently just a handful of Chicago-based groups provide training and consulting services to government and community organizations, typically focused on one specific method. Many local conveners work with national groups such as America Speaks or create their own approaches. Others muddle along with ineffective processes. There are therefore clear opportunities to provide training, facilitation, process design, and mentoring to these groups that incorporate a variety of methodologies, as well as practical kinds of logistical support. Similarly, there is no local community of practice where people using these approaches in Chicago can gather, share experiences, learn from one another, and develop projects of joint benefit. There is therefore a clear opportunity to create one.

Technology such as online dialogue platforms, scenario visualization software, and games can engage more and different kinds of residents, reduce costs, and improve outcomes. Despite some interest, there has been only minimal activity in this area in Chicago. Instead, local online public engagement efforts have sought to crowdsource ideas, enhance government transparency, improve the usability of public data, and help residents use and improve public services. Most online public dialogue instead happens organically on neighborhood forums, blogs, Facebook pages, etc. Some of these sources are monitored by aldermen and have led to small-scale actions. There are therefore opportunities to experiment with new technology, especially to visualize information and engage new groups.

With the exception of the McCormick Foundation and Spencer Foundation, which are both active in the field from the perspective of youth and education, most of the Chicago foundation community has only a limited understanding of the role and potential impact of public dialogue and deliberation on community and policy issues. At the same time, Chicago is home to many academics from a variety of disciplines whose research interest includes dialogue and deliberation. In addition to the impact they make in their specific fields, these scholars could benefit local practitioners and potentially help build a case for more deliberative public engagement. The greatest opportunity that exists right now in Chicago is simply to educate foundations, governments, and community organizations about the role of dialogue and deliberation in public engagement, how it can work, what different forms it can take, etc.

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Similarly, initiatives from all streams encounter challenges evaluating effectiveness. Often the forms of evaluation funders require don't fit with how these practices actually work. There are therefore great opportunities to develop new evaluation models.

MOVING FORWARD: BUILDING A COMMUNITY OF PRACTICE

As stated earlier, this report is motivated by three purposes 1) to provide a survey or a 'lay of the land' of the dialogue and deliberation field: the who, what, and how of dialogue and deliberation in Chicago; 2) to create a resource for the dialogue and deliberation organizations and practitioners as a first step of building a dialogue and deliberation community of practice in Chicago; and 3) to inform IPCE about the role it can play in supporting and promoting dialogue and deliberation in Chicago. The hope is that this report will inform, stimulate further discussion, and potentially encourage cooperation among local dialogue and deliberation practitioners, sponsors, conveners and other interested parties.

There are many ways IPCE and its partners could potentially help a real culture of dialogue and deliberation among residents on community and public policy issues to take root and blossom in Chicago. The most urgent need is for an advocate and thought leader to develop and promote a local vision of and research-supported case for high-quality public engagement, including standards it should meet and values it should incorporate. IPCE could also support a community of practice by providing a regular meeting place and publicizing local projects and resources. It could convene deliberative dialogues, either among students or, if it can maintain neutrality, among residents. It could also support local groups which otherwise could not receive assistance to convene such conversations. Once it has developed its own expertise, it could then provide skills training, process design consulting, and potentially logistical support to local government and non-profits, incorporating multiple methods and perhaps developing its own innovative approaches.

This report was prepared in anticipation of a convening of dialogue and deliberation practitioners planned for December 2012. In the tradition of dialogue and deliberation, that convening will provide an opportunity for practitioners to discuss, deliberate, and share ideas on how to develop a real culture of dialogue and deliberation in the Chicago region. IPCE also expects to share the outcomes of that conversation and help lead action steps that the Institute may assist. The hope is that this report and the convening mark the beginning of a movement to help transform how Chicago area residents relate to their government, institutions, and each other.