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People Powered Social Innovation: The Need for Citizen Engagement

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PEOPLE-POWERED SOCIAL INNOVATION

THE NEED FOR CITIZEN ENGAGEMENT

Citizen engagement is widely regarded as critical to the development and implementation of social innovation. What is citizen engagement? What does it mean in the context of social innovation? **Julie Simon** and **Anna Davies** discuss the importance as well as the implications of engaging the ground.

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Over the last decade, there has been an explosion of methods and approaches to citizen engagement.[1] Competitions, idea banks, crowdsourcing, co-design, online petitions, citizen panels, citizen juries, participatory workshops and participatory budgeting are just some of the hundreds of methods which are becoming increasingly common. Across government and civil society, the value of participation and engagement has arguably taken on the status of orthodoxy. Billions of pounds are spent on community-based and community-driven development projects by international institutions. Development projects that do not include a participatory element are frequently seen as unethical or invalid.[2] And government projects are often seen as illegitimate if they do not include some form of citizen engagement—such as consultations, surveys or citizen panels. Similarly, it has long been recognised in the fields

of business and technology that you need to engage your customers and users in order to innovate.

In the field of social innovation, there is a similar assumption: engaging people in developing new ways of tackling social challenges will lead to more effective and more legitimate solutions. In fact, the idea that citizen engagement is critical to the development and implementation of social innovation is regarded by many as a self-evident truth. Certainly it seems inconceivable that we could develop a long term solution to any of the mounting economic, environmental or social challenges—such as youth unemployment, ageing societies, chronic disease or climate change— without the collaboration and engagement of citizens. Take the case of climate change, for example. This will require profound changes not simply in terms of new technologies but also in terms of human behaviour. We will need to cut our energy use, conserve what is used through recycling and reuse and avoid production where possible rather than expanding it. We will need new models of collaborative consumption. And every part of the economy will need to be transformed—from development to manufacturing to distribution and consumption. This will require innovation on a huge scale. But it will also require solutions that are created "with" and "by" people rather than "for" or "at" them. So, engagement in its various guises seems integral to the development of social innovations.

However, before we can discuss the value of citizen engagement and the important role it plays in social innovation, we first need to define our terms. What is citizen engagement? What is social innovation? And what does citizen engagement mean in the context of social innovation?

DEFINITIONS

We define social innovations as new solutions (products, services, processes etc.) that simultaneously meet a social need (more effectively than existing solutions) and lead to new or improved capabilities and relationships and/or a better use of assets and resources.[3] Examples include microfinance, fair trade, new models of eldercare, preventative interventions in health and criminal justice, co-production and online platforms that enable sharing and mass collaboration.

"Citizen engagement" is a very broad concept and along with "participation", the inherent appeal of the term means it often lacks critical examination. As we understand it, citizen engagement refers to a broad range of activities which involve people in the structures and institutions of democracy or in activities which are related to civil society—such as community groups, non-profits and informal associations. Citizens take part in these activities voluntarily and these activities require some form of action on the part of citizens—although this can include things as diverse as signing a petition, making a donation, volunteering, or taking part in a demonstration. But "engagement" can take many forms beyond civil society—for example, when businesses crowdsource ideas from their customers or when businesses carry out market research to better understand customer needs. Citizens can be incentivised to participate—but their involvement cannot be coerced. And lastly, public participation and citizen engagement activities are usually directed towards a common goal (such as reducing isolation among the elderly, or improving the local community) so they're often strongly connected to a social mission.
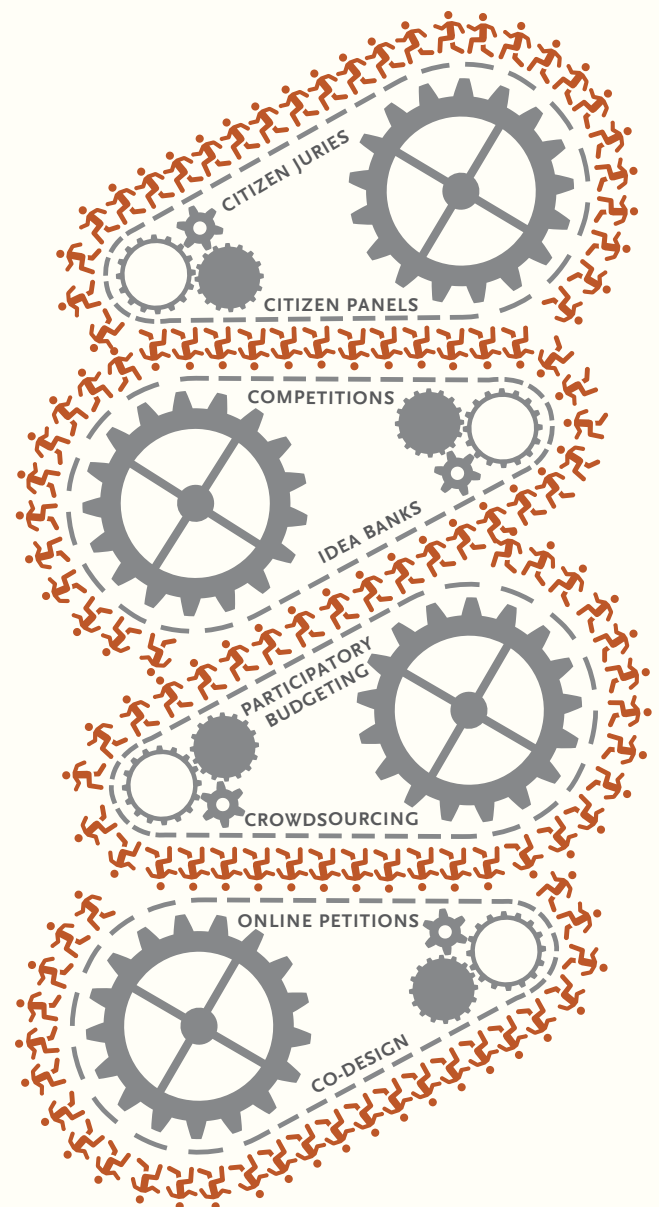
So when we talk about citizen engagement in social innovation, we're talking about the ways in which more diverse voices and actors can be brought into the process of developing and then sustaining new solutions to social challenges—essentially how citizens can be involved in developing social innovations and in social projects which are innovative. But why is engagement important in social innovation? And what does it look like?

WHY IS ENGAGEMENT IMPORTANT?

Engagement as a concept tends to be universally thought of as a "good thing." Sherry Arnstein described citizen participation as "a little like eating spinach: no one is against it in principle because it is good for you."[4] However, it's important to think through the specific functions of engagement, and why exactly it is useful. We argue that there are at least four reasons why involving citizens is particularly important for social innovation:

1. **Engagement enables a better understanding of social needs.** Effective innovations must respond to actual needs as people are experiencing them. Citizens are the best judge of their own needs and are often best placed to articulate these needs. This is because they have unique knowledge of their own desires and experiences. Of course in some cases, citizens themselves develop an innovation, and so needs and challenges are already well understood. But where those driving the development of an innovation do not experience the issue or problem first hand (as is often the case with policy-makers, civil servants and non-profit leaders), it will be extremely valuable to bring citizens into the innovation process.

2. **Engagement enables diversity and provides a channel for new ideas.** Involving a wide range of citizens can increase diversity which is particularly important for problem-solving. Although this idea is often expressed as a truism, recent research helps unpack why diverse perspectives are valuable in developing responses to complex problems. Scott Page's work highlights that people with different perspectives have different "heuristics"— different methods or approaches to finding solutions.[5] When faced with a complex problem, a group of experts with similar perspectives who apply the same heuristics will tend to get stuck in the same places as one another, whereas a diverse group of solvers will not. Empirical research examining crowdsourcing also supports the idea that good solutions come from unexpected sources. For example, looking at solutions put forward using InnoCentive, the crowdsourcing platform, Lars Bo Jeppesen and Karim Lakhani found that successful problem solvers were often in some sense marginal—e.g., they had expertise in a very different academic field, or they were distanced from their own professional community.[6] This meant they were less conventional in their thinking and were able to apply novel insights to the problem at hand.

3. **Engagement can increase the legitimacy of projects and decisions.** If the development and implementation of a particular social innovation (or decisions relating to it) include some mechanism for involving citizens, that innovation is likely to be seen as more legitimate than if it had been developed without this engagement.

4. **Responses to complex challenges will be ineffective without some form of engagement.** Many of the challenges that social innovations aim to tackle, such as obesity or climate change, are extremely complex problems where responses require significant behaviour change. For this reason, solutions cannot be "delivered" to people. Rather they will require citizens' participation and "buy in."

ENGAGING CITIZENS IN DEVELOPING SOCIAL INNOVATIONS

But what does citizen engagement in social innovation look like? Citizens can be involved in social innovation in numerous ways—through research and consultations, through more formal activities such as co-design workshops and idea camps to informal activities online. During the development stages, citizens tend to be involved either to get a better understanding of the needs they are currently experiencing—"informing about present states" or to gather their ideas for new and better solutions—"developing future solutions."[7]

- "Informing about present states" refers to all the ways that citizens can provide information about their current experiences. This information is critical to the development of social innovations.
- "Developing future solutions" refers to all the ways in which citizens contribute and shape new ideas. These might be ideas for entirely new innovations or simply improvements to existing services. In some cases, citizens will provide fully formed ideas and in others they will collaborate with organisations to develop ideas in partnership.

Figure 1 on the next page illustrates these two distinct forms of engagement, along with a dimension of scale — whether the type of activity involves few or many citizens. This gives us four quadrants that help us organise different kinds of citizen engagement in developing social innovations.
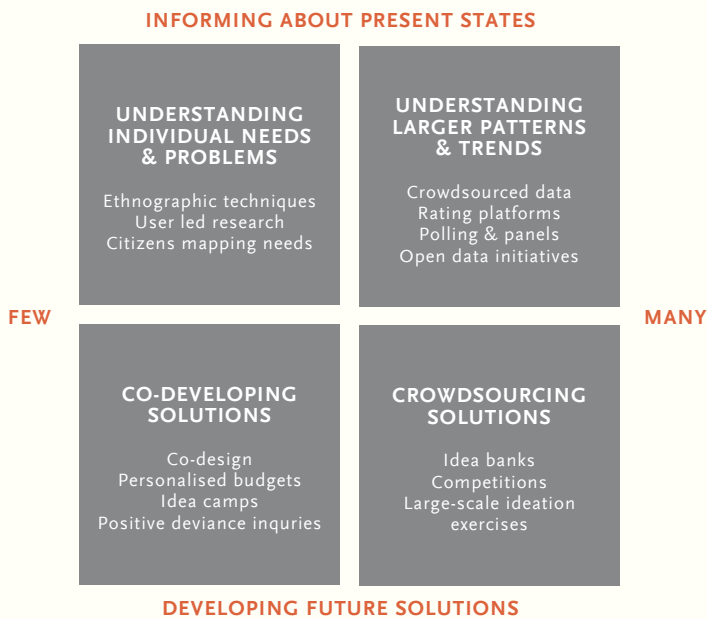
INFORMING ABOUT PRESENT STATES

UNDERSTANDING INDIVIDUAL NEEDS & PROBLEMS Ethnographic techniques User led research Citizens mapping needs	**UNDERSTANDING LARGER PATTERNS & TRENDS** Crowdsourced data Rating platforms Polling & panels Open data initiatives
CO-DEVELOPING SOLUTIONS Co-design Personalised budgets Idea camps Positive deviance inquries	**CROWDSOURCING SOLUTIONS** Idea banks Competitions Large-scale ideation exercises

FEW — MANY

DEVELOPING FUTURE SOLUTIONS

Figure 1: Framework for citizen engagament

To better understand the relationship of citizen engagement to social innovation, it is helpful to make this concept more tangible through specific examples. In what follows, we highlight two methods of involving citizens in the process of developing new solutions: crowdsourcing and co-design.

UNDERSTANDING LARGER PATTERNS AND TRENDS: CROWDSOURCING

The term crowdsourcing was first coined by Jeff Howe who defined it as "the act of a company or institution taking a function once performed by employees and outsourcing it to an undefined (and generally large) network of people in the form of an open call. This can take the form of peer production (when the job is performed collaboratively), but is also often undertaken by sole individuals."[8] The defining feature of crowdsourcing is that it asks the public (rather than experts) to input their knowledge and skills. In the last five years, there has been an explosion of these types of platforms that provide a cost effective way for citizens to contribute data about their experiences. From the perspective of social innovation, crowdsourcing is important as a process that enables large groups of people to contribute information and feedback that helps to uncover needs and problems. It is particularly useful in the innovation process for understanding the scale of a problem, and for identifying larger patterns of need.

Crowdsourcing case study: I Paid a Bribe

I Paid a Bribe is a platform set up by non-profit organisation Janaagraha in 2010 that aims to understand and tackle the issue of corruption in Indian public services.[9] It is an example of a project where citizen involvement is not an added "extra" but absolutely integral—I Paid a Bribe is completely dependent on the collective energy of citizens to be effective.

Citizens are invited to use the platform to upload reports about bribes they paid, bribes they resisted and instances where they received a service without paying a bribe. By gathering this information, the project is able to map the scale of corruption, uncover patterns and trends and lobby for changes in governance and accountability processes. Janaagraha uses the data that they collect to produce citizen reports that help citizens avoid bribery, as well as reports for government agencies that highlight particularly corrupt teams or departments. The organisation also makes recommendations for reforms to rules and procedures.

As well as painting a picture of the nature and scale of bribery in India, I Paid a Bribe can be used to put pressure on corrupt officials and on government departments. There have been many instances where government rules and procedures have been changed in response to information gathered through the site. For example, twenty senior officials at the Department of Transport in the Government of Karnataka in Bangalore were issued with warnings based on information gathered through the site. Changes were also made to registrations of land transactions at the Department of Stamps and Registration in Bangalore.

I Paid a Bribe has now been replicated in Pakistan, Kenya, Greece and Zimbabwe. By March 2013, the site had received 1.9 million visitors from 197 countries. It has also collected 22,492 citizen reports, referring to 833,033,890 rupees worth of bribes from 493 cities across India.[10]

CO-DEVELOPING SOLUTIONS: CO-DESIGN

Co-design describes an approach to social problems that sees designers working in partnership with service users, practitioners and employees to develop solutions that address social challenges. Its central underlying assumption is that individuals experiencing or responding to a social problem must be involved in developing solutions if they are to be effective.

Co-design processes often emphasise the importance of ethnographic research methods in order to understand what needs look like, employing methods also used in design work such as focused observations, mapping user journeys and other forms of visualisation. Participants then come together with service providers and others to develop solutions, often in a workshop setting. Prototyping is another aspect of design methodology that forms an important part of co-design since it enables low cost testing of ideas early on, so that they can be quickly refined and developed. Since co-design requires specialist facilitation and design techniques, it is often led by intermediary agencies who work with citizens and public sector groups.

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Co-design case study: Family by Family

Family by Family is a new model of family support co-designed by The Australian Centre for Social Innovation (TACSI) and families in South Australia.[11] The programme was established to support families and help them thrive, while reducing their need for crisis services. The core idea of the programme is to find, train and resource families who have overcome tough times (known as "sharing families") and connect them with families who want things to change (known as "seeking families"). Matched families then take part in "link up" activities together for between 10 and 30 weeks. In this model, professionals act as brokers to these family interactions rather than delivering services directly.

The programme was developed in partnership with local families from the area (Marion in Adelaide). There was an initial phase of ethnographic research in order to better understand the nature of family stress and coping mechanisms. The team then worked with a smaller group of 20 families – prototype "sharing families" who wanted to use their experiences to help others, along with "seeking families"' who were looking to make some changes to their own family life. Over weekly "sharing family dinners", the team worked with both sets of families and their children for a period of three months to discuss, test out and refine ideas. The project team wanted to co-design all elements of the programme, both at the conceptual level (what the outcomes should be, what the process should look like) and also the interaction level (all the materials, communications, training resources etc.).

This input from local families was essential in conveying the message of the programme effectively. It was the experience of families putting up posters in their local neighbourhoods who were frequently needing to explain what the project was (and wasn't) that eventually led to the description of the programme: "We're a group of families who are about more good stuff for families. We link up families with stuff in common to change the things they want to change – like kids' behaviour or going out more as a family. We're not government. We're not religious. We're not political." This description still features on the programme brochures.

An early evaluation of Family by Family suggests that the programme is contributing to positive outcomes and enabling families to meet some of their immediate goals. In February 2012, an adapted version of the programme was established in a second location, Playford. The team's long term goal is to grow the model in locations throughout Australia.

RISKS OF ENGAGEMENT?

Despite the benefits we've outlined above, it's also important to be aware of the risks associated with engagement practices. There is considerable research from the fields of international development and participatory democracy which suggests that engagement can often lead to negative or poor outcomes. So, for example, some engagement activities can lead to a greater sense of empowerment and agency, while others lead to a feeling of disempowerment and a lack of agency among participants. Similarly, while some participatory activities do promote social inclusion, enabling the inclusion of new actors and issues in public spaces, others can reinforce social hierarchies and the exclusion of particular groups or individuals.

Engagement practices will have to be carefully designed to avoid the risks of co-option by vested interests and elite groups and over-representation of the most affluent, articulate and educated members of the community. Where processes are not seen to be representative, decisions which are taken may be seen as illegitimate and lead to further disengagement.

CONCLUSION

Engagement plays an essential role in social innovation. It can improve the quality of information that is used in the innovation process and therefore help create innovations which are more effective. It also enables contributions from varied and unexpected sources, introducing diverse and new perspectives which add particular value when confronted with complex social issues. There are clear challenges for practitioners to ensure that engagement practices are representative, inclusive and sensitive to the dynamics of the communities in which they take place. However, these are challenges that must be overcome, since engaging citizens is absolutely critical to the development of much needed social innovations. ∎

To find out more about citizen engagement in social innovation, see www.tepsie.eu

Endnotes

1   This article is based on the work of TEPSIE, a research project funded under the European Commission's 7th Framework Programme and is an acronym for "The Theoretical, Empirical and Policy Foundations for Building Social Innovation in Europe". The project is a research collaboration between six European institutions led by the Danish Technological Institute and the Young Foundation and runs from 2012-2015. For more information see www.tepsie.eu.

2   Francis Cleaver, "Paradoxes of participation: questioning participatory approaches to development"', in *Journal of International Development*, vol. 11, (1999): 597-612.

3   The Young Foundation, Social Innovation Overview, A deliverable of the project: "The theoretical, empirical and policy foundations for building social innovation in Europe" (TEPSIE), European Commission – 7th Framework Programme, Brussels: European Commission, DG Research, 2012.

4   Sherry Arnstein, "A Ladder of Citizen Participation", *Journal of the American Institute of Planners*, vol. 35:4 (1969): 216-224, 216.

5   Scott Page, *The Difference: How the Power of Diversity Creates Better Groups*, Firms, Schools, and Societies, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007).

6   Bo Lars Jeppesen and Karim Lakhani, "Marginality and problem solving effectiveness in broadcast search" *Organization Science*, vol.20, (2010).

7   This builds on Christian Bason's model of citizen involvement. See Christian Bason, *Leading Public Sector Innovation: co-creating for a better society*, (Bristol: Policy Press, 2010), 160.

8   Jeff Howe, quoted in Eric Schenk and Claude Guittard, "Towards a characterisation of crowdsourcing practices", *Journal of Innovation Economics*, no. 7 (2011): 93-107.

9   I Paid a Bribe, www.ipaidabribe.com/.

10 ibid.

11 Family by Family, http://familybyfamily.org.au/.