Rethinking Public Engagement

Why we need to rethink public engagement and how to promote a culture of active citizenship

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The budget is the most important policy document that a local government produces because it outlines resources for a community's policy priorities. As such, it has been recognized for decades that local governments should do a better job engaging citizens in the budget process. The standard avenue for citizen engagement in the budget process is often limited to a public hearing or two, which typically happens after important decisions have already been made and often amounts to little more than a chance for citizens to air their grievances at a microphone.

About the word "citizen"

By "citizen," we mean people who share a civic identity. This is the "self" in self-government. It also means participation in the creation and receipt of public goods. This is the "government" in self-government.

New forces have emerged that suggest local governments need to consider public engagement in a new light. Before we examine these forces and their implications, we must recognize that public engagement is the most difficult part of planning and budgeting. To take on a difficult problem, we should first define the problem before attempting to solve it. In that spirit, this special section will first reexamine the reasons for public engagement—because knowing why we do public engagement sets us up to understand how to do public engagement.

We will also strive to "think like a chef and not a cook." A cook follows a prescribed recipe but runs into problems when the recipe does not fit the situation. A chef, however, has deeper understanding and knowledge that they can adapt to the situation.

In this special four-part feature, we take on the monumental challenge of rethinking current models of public engagement. We'll examine the "why" behind public engagement to understand how crucial it is, especially in our age of polarization. We'll also offer insight into how and when to engage the public, especially with co-creation, which can dissolve divides.

Public engagement defined

"Public engagement" refers to the activities by which people's concerns, needs, interests, and values are incorporated into decisions and actions regarding public matters and issues. This usually includes a combination of providing access to relevant information, gathering input, discussing and connecting, identifying and providing choices, and deliberation on major decisions.

(Tina Nabatchi and Matt Leighninger, *Public Participation for 21st Century Democracy*, Jossey-Bass: 2015.)

RETHINKING BUDGETING ABOUT GFOA'S RETHINKING BUDGETING INITIATIVE

Local governments have long relied on incremental line-item budgeting, in which last year's budget becomes next year's with changes around the margins. In a world defined by uncertainty, this form of budgeting puts local governments at a disadvantage, hampering their ability to adapt to changing circumstances. As we all know so well, the ability to adapt has become essential over the last two years—and will certainly remain so for some time. The premise of the Rethinking Budgeting initiative is that the public finance profession has an opportunity to update local government budgeting practices with new ways of thinking and new technologies to help communities better meet changing needs and circumstances. The Rethinking Budgeting initiative seeks out and shares unconventional but promising methods for local governments to improve how they budget, and how they embrace the defining issues of our time.

PART 1

Why Public Engagement is Important

A good place to start rethinking public engagement is to first consider why it's important. If we know why local governments need public input, we can design public engagement accordingly. Traditional reasons for public engagement in planning and budgeting include building trust in the decision-making process, defining community priorities, improving the quality of outcomes, improving relationships between the public and public officials, and building stronger support for the resulting decisions. While these reasons are still valid, we contend that they are incomplete. In this section, we examine four reasons why public engagement is important today in a way that is distinct from decades past, and what conditions give rise to these reasons.[1]

(Re)Establish legitimacy of local government as an institution

In most decades after World War II, the legitimacy of government was taken for granted. A government needs legitimacy to function, but today, the legitimacy of government is in question.[2] Many people, especially young people, feel they need to disrupt institutions in order to be heard.

An important contributor to this loss of legitimacy is a loss of public trust in governing institutions. Many people do not believe public officials will act on behalf of the entire community and that the voices of low-income, Black, Indigenous, and people of color will continue to be unheard and marginalized. For an increasing number of families, the American dream seems unattainable, with income disparities as high as they have been in our recent history.[3] People look to government for solutions that are not forthcoming. People also look to government to be a partner with them in recognizing and addressing shared community problems, and to be seen as a co-producer of public goods with government rather than a passive bystander, customer, or client. Since 2020, we have seen numerous public protests demanding more responsive government on topics as diverse as racial justice, COVID restrictions, reproductive rights, and school curriculums. These protests have become a movement, and they demand an affirmative response from local government—one that puts citizens at the center of public problem-solving—if our democracy is to work as it should.

The loss of public trust is accompanied by increased divisiveness or polarization, making it difficult for people to bridge the divides that separate them. Yet when given the opportunity to name the issues they're concerned about, frame the context of the issue, deliberate, and act together to address the issues, most people are willing to work through tensions and trade-offs to find common ground and solutions they can live with. Engaging citizens in democratic and complementary ways helps them build relationships of trust with other citizens and with public officials, gain confidence in our governing institutions through shared work and responsibility, and become owners of the solutions or co-producers of public goods with government.

Another contributor to government's loss of legitimacy is the "information tsunami" in which society now finds itself. We live in an age of an extreme—and exponentially increasing—volume of available information.[4] Before, citizens had limited information about government, and that information was intermediated by government itself or perhaps one or two media outlets (such as, the local newspaper). Today, citizens have more information sources like Facebook, NextDoor, and Twitter. To make matters worse, the incentives faced by these platforms encourage sensationalism, provoking outrage, and presenting users with information that confirms their preexisting beliefs. This is especially true of social media, which is the most important source of information for many people.[5]

The sheer volume of information available means that citizens are likely to downgrade the authoritativeness of any sole source and cherry-pick sources that feed them their preferred narratives. This creates a negative feedback loop. Sources that provide simple narratives catering to current biases get more attention, thus creating an incentive for them to do more. Sources that try to provide quality information are at a disadvantage because they can't compete as well for the public's attention. Citizens become less certain that they can believe what government officials (or experts in general) say and question the legitimacy of institutions like government.

This is not the only way the information tsunami brings legitimacy into question. The missteps of local government are laid bare as never before. Some missteps may be exaggerated (or fabricated) and others are real, but either way it creates a gap between the perceived performance of government and government's claims of competence. The problem is not that the people who make up the institutions of local government are corrupt or incompetent, but that the issues local government deals with are often complex, and institutions' ability to deal with them are finite.

Align public expectations with what government can realistically accomplish

It has become a truism among public managers that the public expects more from the government than they are willing to pay for. But there is scant research on the public's expectations versus reality. Survey results supplied to GFOA by Polco suggest that public managers' observations may be accurate. A majority (approximately 75 percent) of residents across American cities report that the quality of services from their local government is "good" or "excellent." Yet the same respondents also rate the value of services for the taxes paid to the local government poorly—a 49 on a 0 to 100 scale, where 100 is "excellent" and 0 is "poor." This may imply that although day-to-day services are satisfactory, citizens are looking for more from their government than they are getting.

Part of the problem is that the rhetoric of democratic politics has become misaligned with what local governments can achieve. Failure occurs when the public's expectations and the government's claims of what it can accomplish diverge from reality. Elections often incentivize attacks on current officeholders (blaming them for problems) or big promises of how new candidates will solve problems (which rarely come to pass)—both of which tend to undermine faith in government. This divergence between public expectations of government and government's capabilities is a potential problem for all local governments, even if it is a matter of the public expecting flawless street conditions in exchange for minimal taxes.

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The issue the public is concerned about is often more complex than street conditions. In the Polco survey, respondents were most critical of housing and economic opportunities. Complex problems like this do not have tidy technical solutions and cannot be solved to everyone's satisfaction.[6] Compromises, trade-offs, and continuous management of the issue are the only resolution. For example, a shortage of affordable housing requires greater density of housing to address. But the success of NIMBYism ("not in my backyard") shows that there is no shortage of people who prefer lower density, at least in their neighborhood. So, if government is expected to "solve" issues like affordable housing, it will be put in a position of almost certain failure. The result of failure is to further sap local government's legitimacy.

As an illustration of expectations versus reality in local government planning and budgeting, let's consider the "equity" movement in budgeting. GFOA has written extensively about the importance of considering equity in budgeting as one of the elements of fairness in budgeting.[7] But the rhetoric around equity in budgeting sometimes goes beyond what government can do. For example, the stated aims of budgeting in equity sometimes imply that equal outcomes for members of the public should be a goal. One can question whether local government has the ability (or the writ) to achieve this goal, especially when a citizen's own agency has an important impact on the extent to which they achieve the outcome in question, and where government intervention may be seen as overreach into private affairs.

Get feedback from a fractured public

In the heyday of the traditional budget, the 1960s, society was far more conformist than it is today. Society has been becoming steadily more individualistic since then. Add to that the information tsunami that encourages further and faster fragmenting of the public into groups that cohere (usually temporarily) around some issue of shared interest.

This means there is no single "public" that government can get feedback from. The "public" that engages in local issues (the people who attend city council meetings, participate online, and email council members and staff) is made up of self-selected individuals who have an interest in that issue. These people are not representative of most citizens. Many citizens may not feel they have a stake in the issue at hand or may be content with the status quo. Others may not have access to the decision-making process. Government cannot make decisions based on the voices of those who show

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up and who are not representative of the interests of the larger community. So, what is the purpose of public engagement?

First, it is to hear from people with a stake in the issue at hand. These people may be represented by an interest group. However, in other cases, they may not. Low-income people or members of marginalized communities may not have the resources to organize, the time to attend public meetings, or feel welcome. Hearing from people with a stake helps government understand those with the most to lose (or gain) from the outcome of a decision. Minimizing losses and figuring out how to make as many people as possible better off is essential to maximizing the total benefit for the community. This may help defuse potential conflict among those for whom the stakes are highest. In many cases, the people with the most to lose are historically marginalized populations. This is because these groups, by definition, do not have resources at their disposal or access to the policymaking process. Even a loss that is not so large in most people's estimation could hurt a marginalized group because it is relatively large, compared to the resources they have.

A second purpose is to bolster government's legitimacy in the eyes of the public that is most affected by the issue. Legitimacy is the government's ability to justify its decisions with diverse stakeholders. Legitimacy helps engage the public in co-creating solutions that government authority can help enact. Conventional public engagement, like the public hearing, often delegitimizes government because people do not feel heard, do not understand how decisions are made, and get the impression that government officials are not interested in public opinion.

Finally, public engagement cuts across different perspectives on democracy. Public engagement may support "direct democracy," or giving the public the power to make decisions. In this case, the representativeness of the participants would be critical. But public engagement is often one part of a broader planning/budgeting process that helps inform the decision-making of elected officials. This supports a "representative" form of democracy. Some elected officials see themselves as delegates (voting in a way that represents their constituents' preferences) and others more as trustees (voting for what they think is best). Public engagement can inform both types of elected officials by providing a clearer sense of constituents' preferences (while helping refine those preferences), or by helping elected officials think through the issue and make wiser decisions. Even in a process that supports representative democracy, it would be ideal if the participants were a cross-section of the entire community. In any event, high-quality public engagement will provide better information than the common alternatives like traditional public hearings, closed-door meetings with interest groups, social media trends, and more.

Provide an alternative to the politics of cynicism

A public fractured into temporary and shifting interest groups cannot provide sustained, coherent solutions to the issues that people are concerned about, especially when issues are complex, where no perfect or permanent solution is possible. On top of this is the questioned legitimacy of government—the institution that might have the authority to provide or at least coordinate a solution. So, if the public can't provide a solution, and the delegitimized government can't either, then opposition to the status quo provides a message that a group can cohere around. This "politics of cynicism" lacks unifying ideas, programs, or plans for a solution. In fact, when one is proposed from within the opposition group, the group tends to lose cohesion because the members of the group must confront the complexities required to solve the problem that originally brought the group together.

High-quality public engagement must provide an alternative to the politics of cynicism, channeling citizen interest into constructive dialogue and a search for solutions.

[1] The four reasons are inspired by: Martin Gurri, *The Revolt of the Public and the Crisis of Authority in the New Millennium*, Second Edition (Stripe Press, 2018).

[2] According to Pew Research Center, American's trust in government dropped from 77 percent in 1964 to 18 percent in 2017. Around that time, Americans' belief that the federal government serves their interest went from 64 percent to 21 percent. Though these statistics are focused on the federal government, we should acknowledge that: 1) local government typically fares better than the federal (and state) government in these polls, but also 2) their respective scores are often correlated, which means declining federal scores do not bode well for local government.

[3] See for example: "Most Americans Say There Is Too Much Economic Inequality in the U.S., but Fewer Than Half Call It a Top Priority," Pew Research Center, January 9, 2020, and "Gini Index of Money Income and Equivalence-Adjusted Income: 1967 to 2014," U.S. Census Bureau, September 16, 2015.

[4] The term "information tsunami" was coined by Martin Gurri, *The Revolt of the Public and the Crisis of Authority in the New Millennium*.

[5] In 2019, the Pew Research Center found that over half of Americans (54 percent) either got their news "sometimes" or "often" from social media. Facebook was the most popular social media site where American adults got their news.

[6] This is closely related to the concept of "wicked problems" in public discourse. For one of the earliest discussions of this topic, see: Horst W.J. Rittel, and Melvin M. Webber, "Dilemmas in a general theory of planning," *Policy Sciences*, 4(2), June 1973.

[7] GFOA's Financial Foundations Framework identifies "fair treatment" as one of the five pillars of a solid financial foundation. Equity is one facet of fairness within that pillar. An example of a more recent publication is: Shayne Kavanagh and Jake Kowalski, "The basics of equity in budgeting," GFOA, February 2021.

PART 2

The Search for Solutions

An organizing premise of GFOA's Rethinking Budgeting initiative is that budget officers need to be "chefs, not cooks." This means that the budget officer, like a chef, needs to understand the available raw ingredients and how to combine and prepare them to suit the intended audience. A cook, by contrast, only follows a recipe that was provided by someone else. This is the difference between real knowledge and know-how.[1]

When it comes to public engagement, there is no set recipe that local governments can follow because the needs for public engagement are context-specific. To give an example, public engagement could be used either to: 1) get input from the public, which would be one factor used by the elected board to make a decision; or 2) have the public make the decision. Neither of these options are inherently better, and which to use will depend on factors like the nature of the issue at hand and how much local officials are willing or able to defer to public opinion. There are other contextual issues like this that the designer of public engagement will need to think through.

In that spirit, this section will offer broader design principles for public engagement (the raw ingredients), along with examples of how those design principles might be put into practice. Taken together, these principles will allow local governments to fulfill the purposes of public engagement, as discussed in the previous section. A good chef knows that a dish might be made better by leaving out certain ingredients, and likewise, the design principles should be used selectively—applied where they fit and left aside where they do not.

But before we dive into the details of the design principles, let's strike a note of optimism. Recent research has highlighted reasons to be optimistic about public engagement in local governments.[2] For example, people are inherently social creatures who seek purpose and community. This means that, with a good process, people can come together to address difficult problems. Further, people are inherently creative, pragmatic, and collaborative problem-solvers—and the design principles we will discuss can help bring out and accentuate these strengths.

PRINCIPLE 1

Quality over quantity: more public engagement isn't always better.

There are reasons to be just as cautious about over-engagement as under-engagement. For one, low-quality public engagement can do more harm than good. In fact, one study suggested that attending a typical public meeting was associated with a lower sense of efficacy and belonging to the community![3] High-quality public engagement costs time and money, so if a high volume of public engagement comes at the expense of quality, it might be better to have low volume but higher quality.[4] Also, the public is already overwhelmed with information, so the goal should not be to add to the information tsunami but rather to cut through it.

But before designing public engagement, a local government needs to find the issues where public engagement has the best chance of being effective. Here are some examples of issues that may be ripe for productive public engagement:

- The decision-making process contains time and space for the public's input to influence the government's direction. If the issue has already been "decided," engagement will be less effective, and participants may become frustrated. For example, the traditional budget hearing takes place at the end of the budget process after most (if not all) important decisions have been made. Public engagement could happen before the budget process, allowing government officials to learn what issues the public feels are most important. The budget can then direct resources to address those issues.
- Issues are primarily defined by tensions among positive values such as freedom, safety, and equality. People on all sides of the issue want the best for the community, even if their definitions of "best" differ.
- All major stakeholders realize that the status quo of the issue under discussion isn't sustainable. This could be, for example, the budget itself, where there are big and persistent deficits, or there might be some community concern (such as public health, safety, and more).
- The commitment and action of multiple groups is necessary to make progress on the issue.
- There is a "middle ground" on the issue, and people could be brought over to it. In contrast, highly polarized issues that have devolved in stark win-lose terms will have less potential.
- Different stakeholders may misunderstand how others perceive the issue but be open to having a good-faith conversation with people on the "other side."
- Resources exist to support the decisions that come out of public engagement.

These criteria have critical implications for engaging the public in planning and budgeting.

First, picking the right issue is the *indispensable* starting point for productive public engagement.

Second, the "right issue" may not be the entire budget! Local governments have limited resources for public engagement, so rather than trying to engage the public on the entire budget, it may be better to pick a specific topic that is of interest to the community. For example, an assistant city manager worked for a small town where trees were an important part of the community's character. The public was engaged in a conversation about how to assess the stock of trees in the community, which led to funding in the next budget for a special project to inventory the trees and their health. The budget in the year after that created funding for ongoing assistance from an arborist to maintain trees in public rights of way. Of course, local governments can engage the public in conversation about the wider budget, but it is not required for productive public engagement.

Third is to know the goal behind engaging the public, which can range from informing citizens about a decision that has already been made, to empowering them to make the decision themselves.[5] Most public engagement in public finance will be midway between these two, where the public's involvement is used to help make the decision but is not the final word. Knowing the goal is important for a couple of reasons. It sets expectations for all stakeholders, including elected officials, staff, and citizens. It also informs the design of the engagement. For instance, if the goal is to inform, then the design should avoid giving participants the impression that they are decision-makers. If the goal is to engage citizens in the decision-making, the design must allow them to participate effectively but also make clear to citizens what role their participation plays in getting to the final decision.

The fourth implication is if the issues at hand are not a good fit with engagement—that is, if you do not have the institutional capacity for public engagement—you might be better off not doing public engagement. You need the institutional capacity to see public engagement through to a successful conclusion.

PRINCIPLE 2

Build or bolster the institutions to support public engagement.

High-quality democratic decisions depend on high-quality democratic institutions. Further, lasting democratic legitimacy does not come from charismatic leaders; it comes from institutions. Thus, local government must invest in institutions that can support high-quality public engagement, which requires more resources but is likely to arrive at better, more widely supported decisions. This will be more efficient overall, considering that quick but poor decisions can be costly over time.

That said, building the institutional capacity for better public engagement in the budget office may be difficult for many local governments. Public engagement requires specialized skills that might not match the skills and interests of existing staff, and the resources may not exist to create a permanent new capacity in the budget office.

So how might this capacity be created? The budget office could work more closely with other elements within local government that do have

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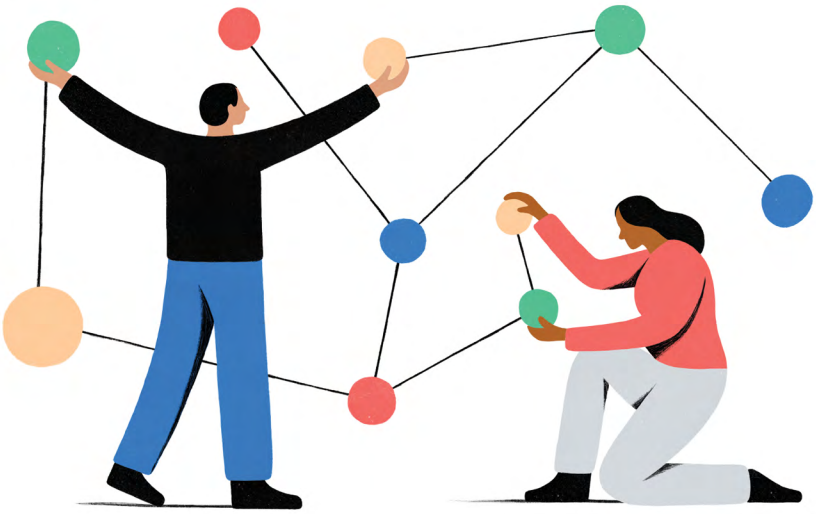
capacity for public engagement. Some public information or communication departments are growing beyond the traditional public relations role to support high-quality public engagement. For example, in the City of Mississauga and the City of Burlington, both in Ontario, the public information office plays a lead role in public engagement around the budget. Other municipalities, such as Larimer County and the City of Longmont, both in Colorado, have developed internal facilitation teams. Employees across multiple departments dedicate time outside their normal duties to build their skills through dedicated training. When a department needs help, they can call on that internal group for assistance.

But institutions don't have to rely on their employees. Examples of outside resources include universities, community foundations, philanthropic groups, other local governments, and civic organizations. For example, a contract with a local consultant or university could provide as-needed support for public engagement. Relying on outside consultants can be costly, but the cost of no engagement or low-quality engagement can be even more significant overall. An alternative could be using citizen leadership academies, which have traditionally prepared citizens to work on boards and committees. Those academies could train citizens to volunteer as facilitators.

PRINCIPLE 3

Think of public engagement as an improved capacity for sense-making.

The "information tsunami" we described earlier challenges our ability to make sense of the world around us. Public engagement supports government in transforming the noise around local issues into a more useful form. Conventional engagement—such as surveys that lack rigor, one-at-a-time-at-the-microphone, emails to elected officials, and social media posts—collect individual opinions and preferences. But such data is limited in terms of perspective, questionable in terms of accuracy, and lacking in terms of recognizing inherent tensions and trade-offs. Too often, people are talking past each other, focusing on different aspects of the issue or different underlying values. As a result, simple "magic bullet" solutions or blame games dominate, and processes can't tap into the best of human nature: our creativity in addressing complex challenges.



When it comes to public engagement, there is no set recipe that local governments can follow because the needs for public engagement are context-specific.

Quality engagement must first process and filter raw public data into quality information that allows the public to engage with it productively and deliberatively. Formats like "issue guides" (nifi.org/en/issue-guides/issue-guides) walk the reader through the nuances of an issue and the choices the community is faced with, without leading them to a conclusion. The goal is to avoid the shortcuts and spark our best thinking. This art of framing for deliberation rather than framing for persuasion[6] is a skill local governments must develop capacity for to support quality public engagement. Think of public engagement as a "weather station" that provides feedback on the prevailing winds of public opinion, as opposed to the thumb-in-air of relying on public hearings, social media, and more. In the end, communities need processes that can turn raw data and opinion into quality information and questions, and then, through authentic engagement and discussion, into usable knowledge and mutual understanding, which can lead to wisdom, high-quality decisions, and collaborative action.

Public engagement as sense-making helps the public make sense of what local government does and can do. It can help the public better understand local government's capabilities and limits. It can help create a shared sense of reality between the public and public officials. This happens by bringing them into the decision-making process and face-to-face with the complexities and hard trade-offs at hand.

So, what are the methods governments can use for sense-making? Many conventional engagement processes—such as surveys, citizen comment, and open houses—are focused on gathering opinion and on "input." That raw data is necessary, but it's only the beginning.

"Deliberative engagement" methods are critical for moving raw data down the line toward wisdom. Such processes focus on interaction and rely on key components, such as high-quality background information, that help participants engage in issues with more nuance, small group discussion, clear ground rules for conversation, diverse participants, capable facilitators and, perhaps, trusted third parties (perhaps a minister/clergy member or a school official) who can help bridge trust between citizens and government.

As research on social psychology demonstrates, humans are not wired to interact with opposing views on difficult issues, so building capacity in these components is critical to transforming our polarization-ready brains, at least temporarily, into ones that are willing to deliberate.[7] The information coming out of deliberative forums is different than that coming out of a survey or one-at-a-time-at-the-microphone. It is data that shows how people engage each other, how they work through tough issues, and which trade-offs they are willing or unwilling to accept. Most important, quality deliberative processes can often spark human creativity since participants cannot rely on simple solutions or the blame game and thus often develop new ways to address their shared problems.

This is not to imply that local government should be a windsock and go with whatever the prevailing winds are or to imply that citizens should accept local government as-is and give up hope that it can address difficult problems. High-quality public engagement also works to refine public opinion by helping citizens understand the complexities at work and how those might be addressed. The deliberative process brings together public opinion with expert knowledge, tapping into the best of each while working to avoid either of them dominating too much.

PRINCIPLE 4

Help the public engage with complexity.

Many of the community challenges that inspire the passion of citizens are complex problems. Complex problems are distinct from problems that are merely complicated. A jet engine is complicated, but once you do understand it, you can make changes and get predictable results. A system like the economy is complex, with unpredictable results arising from the interactions of its many moving parts. You cannot "fix" complex problems. Rather, it is best to recognize the possible trade-offs, the competing values underlying those trade-offs, and then negotiate the resulting tensions. Examples of complex problems local governments contend with include public safety, drug use, education, and public health.

Complex problems pose a challenge to public engagement because they defy easy answers and therefore contribute to the politics of cynicism. In the absence of a clear solution, those interested in the problem cohere around being against the status quo and look for people to blame for the status quo (often public officials). This can lead public officials to perceive the public as unreasonable and therefore impossible to productively engage with. Though the public is not inherently unreasonable, they can adopt unreasonable views in the context of a complex problem.

See Part 3, "Helping Citizens Engage with Complexity," for useful strategies.

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PRINCIPLE 5

Push back against the politics of cynicism with the politics of co-creation.

Local governments can partially offset the politics of cynicism by fostering a politics of co-creation. Public engagement can be designed to promote mutual understanding and a desire to jointly work toward solutions. Rather than focusing on what divides the community, focus on what unites it. This approach is known as "appreciative inquiry," the premise of which is to focus participants on agreeing on what they like or value about the community and on ways to build on those strengths and do more of what people like. This stands in contrast to the politics of cynicism, which focuses on what people are against. The general approach to appreciative inquiry is:

- Identify what participants like or feel positively about in the community or find "bright spots" within the issue under discussion.
- Decide how to preserve or do more of the things people like or value or expand or multiply the "bright spots."
- Put the designs into practice.

For more ways to help citizens work together, see Part 4, "Fostering a Politics of Co-Creation."

PRINCIPLE 6

Revitalize the responsibilities that go along with rights.

In a democratic form of government, citizens have certain rights and responsibilities to uphold the democratic government that guarantees those rights. In the heyday of traditional budgeting, the 1950s through the 1970s, a strong sense of communitarianism prevailed, marked by interdependence and cooperation. Since then, individualism has become more prevalent, marked by independence and egoism.[8] As individualism has become dominant in recent decades, there has been more emphasis on individual rights and less on our collective responsibility to maintain the system that guarantees those rights.

Local government can reinvigorate the discussion of citizens' responsibilities under a democratic system and find balance between rights and

responsibilities. This can start by shifting the fundamental question being asked of citizens from "What do you want?" to "What would you do?" and, ultimately, "What should *we* do?" (meaning, the government and public together). This takes the citizen out of the role of an individualistic consumer of public services and makes them part of a team effort to address community problems. This shift can have another, perhaps unexpected, benefit: creating empathy for public officials. Once citizens realize that the choices are hard, they may come to better understand the realities and limitations of government.

The best way to bring this perspective into public engagement in planning and budgeting is to require participants to work through making trade-offs—rather than asking for more, they must decide what they are willing to give up in order to get it. Ideally, this would include conversations with fellow citizens and negotiating preferences in a group setting. The deliberative processes discussed in "Helping Citizens Engage with Complexity" could help.

This leads us to a more powerful expression of citizen responsibility: coproduction. Coproduction is "a process through which inputs from individuals who are not in the same organization are transformed into goods and services."[9] When citizens actively contribute to civic discourse, they not only inform public policies—they can become co-producers with government in the delivery of services. Rather than playing a passive role with government acting on their behalf, as co-producers, citizens become active contributors in the conception, design, steering, and management of public goods and services. Public engagement works best when it is woven into the fabric of civic life, creating a culture of shared problem-solving. It is more than an initiative dusted off at budget time and then mothballed until the following year. Coproduction is about building civic capacity and aligning professional routines with the work citizens do to fix public problems. Through public engagement, citizens and local government officials can identify community assets and resources that can be used to address public problems and coproduce the goods and services that enhance and support economic viability and civic life.

Hampton, Virginia, Makes Coproduction Work

In the City of Hampton, Virginia, a group of community organizers requested the city to finance construction and operation of a new neighborhood center for sports and educational programs, even though there was a city-funded recreation center less than two miles away. While the city and community had different interests, a deliberative public engagement process led to an acceptable solution for all parties.

The city and neighborhood residents agreed to work together to find a viable solution. The city agreed to renovate and maintain a vacant and abandoned junior high school that was originally built for Black students and was closed in 1968, when public schools were integrated. Neighborhood residents volunteered to operate the facility, including providing program and staff support. This win-win scenario resulted in the adaptive reuse of a vacant and abandoned historic school building in the Black community that many residents had a sentimental attachment to; the opportunity for neighborhood residents to provide the programs and services they wanted; and a partnership between the neighborhood and city hall that met the interests of both. The Yarborough Henry Thomas Community Center (above) has been in operation for almost 30 years, offering a mix of public and community programs for neighborhood residents.

Following are some examples of public engagement mechanisms that foster citizen responsibility for their government by engaging them in making trade-offs and/or coproduction.

- **Budget games or simulations** put participants in the position of proposing hypothetical solutions to balance a budget. This requires participants to engage with the hard trade-offs that balancing a budget requires (see gfoa.org/materials/gfr822-tools-of-engagement).
- **Charrettes** are often used in the design of buildings, parks, transportation systems, and more (see canr.msu.edu/nci/). They are used to bring together stakeholders, identify issues, and work together to find solutions. Charrettes could work for issues besides infrastructure, where experts and community members must work together to solve a problem.
- **Asset maps** catalog important services and resources (see resources.depaul.edu/abcd-institute/resources/Pages/tool-kit.aspx). Knowing the resources available across the community to address complex problems is the first step to engaging those resources in coproduction.
- **Neighborhood councils** could be used not only to identify issues the neighborhood is concerned about but also to mobilize residents to address the issue.

Procedural justice is critical because people are more willing to accept a decision or action that goes against their self-interest when they perceive that the process that led to the decision was fair and transparent.

PRINCIPLE 7

Develop robust strategies for dealing with bad actors.

The unfortunate companion to the politics of cynicism is the proliferation of "bad actors" in public engagement. Bad actors disrupt the process, eschew compromise, and impede productive conversation. The solution starts with recognizing that not all bad actors are the same. Conventional bad actors are not necessarily out to intentionally sabotage public engagement or spread misinformation; they may feel that they are not being heard or may hold beliefs that are extreme or misguided. This is distinct from what we might term "bad-faith actors" who are unwilling to engage in a good-faith conversation about the issues at hand and might even personally gain from continued conflict—personal satisfaction or status among their peers by "standing up to government," for example. Local government can design public engagement to limit the damage that both kinds of bad actors can do and limit their influence.

A starting point is to design public engagement to strive for "procedural justice," or the sense that the process used to reach a decision was fair. Are the decision-makers doing their best to be objective and neutral? Is it clear how the process works? Are participants treated with dignity, and do they have a voice? Procedural justice is critical because people are more willing to accept a decision or action that goes against their self-interest when they perceive that the process that led to the decision was fair and transparent.[10] The most intransigent bad-faith actors may only be satisfied by getting all of what they want, or it may not be possible to satisfy them. But procedural justice helps ensure that more persuadable participants are willing to support (or at least not fight) decisions that do not align with their self-interest. (You can consult GFOA's "What's Fair?" series at gfoa.org/fairness for more on how to create procedural justice, particularly Part 1.)

So, what about the bad-*faith* actors who will not be moved by fairness? How can they be addressed?

First, many of the features of deliberative engagement (see Principle 4) change the dynamics that bad actors usually take advantage of. At a public hearing with a single microphone, those with simple stories (good versus bad) and high confidence (they are enlightened, and others are idiots) are rewarded. Those who are considering multiple perspectives and struggling with the trade-offs have no clear place. In a deliberative discussion, the opposite environment can be developed. Simple solutions to complex problems seem out of place, even ridiculous. Nuance is welcomed and rewarded. New ideas are nurtured and human creativity and problem-solving are sparked.

Next, an approach with wide application is to design public engagement to take place in small groups. Many engagement designs revolve around small group conversations, where summaries of the small group conversations are then aggregated to get an impression from across the entire group of participants. Many bad actors will not be attracted to grandstanding in front of a handful of other people; the small audience defeats the purpose. Even if the small group format doesn't dissuade the bad actor, at least the damage they cause will be contained among a limited number of people.

Lastly, well-trained facilitators have tools for managing bad actors. These people are often misdiagnosed as having negative motives, but the real issue is that they do not feel heard or respected. A quality process—where a facilitator engages the participants and notetakers capture participants' ideas in a small group setting that allows everyone to talk—will help address those concerns. If the bad actor continues to be a problem, more interventions can be invoked, such as asking probing questions to help them consider broader perspectives, creating ground rules, or making explicit space for other speakers.

PRINCIPLE 8

Understand the role of the "expert" and play it with care.

Earlier, we described how the legitimacy of government has been called into question. Related to this is a loss of faith in expertise. For example, one survey found that "about half to three-quarters (of those surveyed) think it is better to rely on people with practical experience to solve pressing problems in society than to rely on those with expertise. Public skepticism of relying on experts is shared across those on the right and left."[11] The implication is that the public is less likely than in the past to defer to the expertise of a local government's professional staff. Public engagement must be designed accordingly.

Primarily, public engagement needs to take on a tone of facilitation. Instead of seeking to "educate" the public about the facts as local officials see them, it may be more fruitful to facilitate a process of discovery, where citizens learn about an issue for themselves. Being presented with a set of facts is not a surefire way to change someone's mind. Deliberative democracy methods (Principle 4) and polarity management (Principle 6) are methods that invite participants to learn about issues for themselves and evolve how they think about the issue.

It is worth recalling our earlier distinction between "complex" and "complicated" problems. Complicated problems are where experts shine. Who better to fix a jet engine than an expert

on jet engines? Complex problems, though, are resistant to expertise in a couple of ways. Professional staff are ill-suited to define the values that should be used to weigh the trade-offs between possible solutions. Also, because of the moving parts and unpredictable interactions between those parts, it is difficult, if not impossible, to know the forces that underlie a complex problem or how a proposed solution will play out. This means that experts can easily be second-guessed and discredited if they express overconfident beliefs about a complex problem. Several implications follow from this:

- When it comes to complex problems, have experts "on tap, not on top." Experts should be available to help answer factual questions, but they can't make the final call because professional public servants should avoid imposing their values on the public. Further, experts tend to overemphasize what can be easily observed and measured, while the public might give much more weight to the intangibles. For example, experts could frame viable options for the public to deliberate on and weigh pros and cons. This would avoid imposing a solution and provides space for the public's take on the pros and cons, which might differ from the experts' take.
- Leave complicated problems to the experts. For these types of problems, there are often technically superior or even "right" answers that experts have that the public does not. At best, engaging the public on complicated problems may be time and energy better spent somewhere else. At worst, it could result in suboptimal solutions and breed skepticism about public engagement among local government officials, as it highlights the amateur status of the public.
- Professional staff should remain humble about their expertise. In today's environment, professing expertise can rub audiences the wrong way, and the information tsunami makes it easy to find information to discredit those who do.

Finally, we will address the average citizen's lack of knowledge of how local governments operate. This can be viewed as an obstacle to engagement, but there are many solutions. First, some issues the public is interested in may not require much, if any, special knowledge about local government operations, and that information can usually be provided as part of the public engagement event.

The City of Dubuque, Iowa, for example, developed a short primer on city government to help prepare participants for a discussion about prioritizing capital projects. This primer was more effort than a short conversation, but it was not overly burdensome for the city and did provide participants with valuable context.

If the issues at hand are too complex to be explained quickly, a local government could select an engagement method that provides the time and resources for in-depth examination of the issue. A citizen "blue ribbon committee" is a well-known variant of this approach, and "citizen assemblies" are a modern approach that have been used successfully in many governments to address complicated and complex issues (see citizenassemblies.org). Lastly, if an issue does span jurisdictional boundaries, the engagement could include representatives of all the relevant governments. For example, a meeting about spending on school safety could be cosponsored by the school district and the municipal police department.

PRINCIPLE 9

Balance expert judgment and public engagement for planning and budgeting.

Public engagement is distinct from direct democracy. The public that engages on a given issue will almost never be representative of all the people a government serves. Consider two simple examples. First, for any issue, there will always be part of the population that does not have a strong enough opinion to justify investing their time and energy in participation. Thus, people with the most moderate views will be underrepresented. Second, sometimes a particular individual is asked to participate as a representative of their group, but no group is a monolith, and there is no guarantee that any individual knows the full range of the group's views or can accurately represent them. So, what should be done?

First, don't think of public engagement as an exercise in direct democracy. Instead, think of it as an effort to make sense of and listen to the concerns of those for whom the stakes are highest. That could be people who are most caught up in conflicts around a given issue, or it could be marginalized citizens who have consistently gotten the short end of the public policy stick. There are strategies for designing public engagement that underrepresented groups will be more likely to participate in.[12]

Second, complement in-person engagement with broader methods of making sense of the public's views, like surveys. Surveys and public engagement contextualize each other. Let's consider the following as an illustration of the need for broader sense-making. During the summer of 2020, there were highly publicized calls to "defund the police" in some communities; however, these calls were largely from activists whose views were overrepresented by platforms like social media and skewed media coverage. Surveys showed little support for defunding the police among the broader population, including among minority groups.[13] Surveys and "thicker" public engagement processes, like forums, provide distinct insights into public perspectives and can complement each other when designed and interpreted well.

Third, the planning and budgeting process should weave together the input from the public and experts. Both are critical, and processes that let either dominate can be problematic—for example, letting experts dominate risks focusing only on what is easily measured and ignoring less easily measurable things like culture, politics, and community practices. Letting the public dominate risks amateur and suboptimal solutions for technical problems. Quality processes often bounce back and forth between the two, with elected officials and city leaders working to make sure expert and public voices inform the other.

> Don't think of public engagement as an exercise in direct democracy. Instead, think of it as an effort to make sense of and listen to the concerns of those for whom the stakes are highest.

Finally, public officials can think of the results from public engagement as "design constraints." Design constraints limit the ways in which someone can design a solution. We live in a representative democracy, where elected officials are expected to make wise choices on behalf of all their fellow citizens. Public engagement helps elected officials make wiser planning and budgeting choices but does not take away their role as the final decision-maker. It is worth repeating that public engagement should: 1) take place with an issue where there is room for public input, where a direction has not already been decided; 2) happen early enough in the decision-making process that the "constraints" provided by the public can still fit in with existing commitments on how the issue in question should be handled; and 3) be clear with participants about what their role is and make sure they have the correct expectations of what could result from their participation. The biggest point here is to distinguish if participants are making the decision or providing a source of input that public officials will use in making the final decision.

PRINCIPLE 10

Design public engagement to work for elected officials.

Public officials stand to gain from high-quality public engagement, but public engagement will not go far if elected officials don't support it. Below are potential concerns, along with ways of addressing those concerns.

- **They have been turned off from public engagement by bad experiences with the conventional public hearing.** The fix: show how a new approach to public engagement addresses the problems associated with conventional public engagement.
- **They have come into office with a strong personal vision or goals and do not feel the need for public input into that vision.** The fix: complex issues often require the public to play a role in the solution. The best way to get the public to act is to make them a part of the process, with shared ownership of the resulting solution. The vision has a better chance of being achieved and having lasting impact if the public is involved. Public engagement can respect the core of the elected official's vision and goals and invite the public to help refine them and get involved in making them a reality.
- **They feel they already know what the public wants.** The fix: wanting it and getting it are two different things. Public engagement can help refine citizens' relationship with government by fostering more realistic expectations of government and involving citizens in co-creation of solutions.
- **They see public engagement as risky for their political future.** The fix: high-quality public engagement can reduce risk by helping elected officials decide if the time is ripe for action on a controversial issue or if more discussion is needed—and by providing some political cover for making difficult decisions. There is also evidence that the public has more confidence in elected officials when high-quality public engagement occurs.[14]
- **They do not want to invest their own time in engaging the public.** The fix: design a process that does not require a direct investment of the official's time.

The other nine design principles can also help ensure that public engagement works for elected officials. For example, Principle 1 helps pick an issue where there is room for public engagement, where elected officials have not already settled on a direction. Principle 7 describes how to deal with bad actors and design a fair process that reduces the risk of destructive conflict. Principle 9 emphasizes that public engagement does not override elected officials' role as the government's decision-maker.

[1] First Principles: The Building Blocks of True Knowledge," Farnam Street blog (fs.blog/first-principles/).

[2] Martin Carcasson, "Why Process Matters: Democracy and Human Nature," *National Civic Review*, Spring 2018.

[3] Knight Soul of the Community is a three-year study conducted by Gallup of the 26 John S. and James L. Knight Foundation communities across the United States (2009).

[4] See also: Xiao Hu Wang and Thomas A. Bryer, "Assessing the Costs of Public Participation: A Case Study of Two Online Participation Mechanisms," *The American Review of Public Administration*, 43(2), 2013.

[5] See IAP2's "Spectrum of Public Participation." This widely cited model can be found at iap2.org.

[6] Will Friedman, "Reframing 'Framing,'" Center for Advances in Public Engagement, 2020.

[7] Carcasson.

[8] For survey data and other data on this point, see: Robert D. Putnam and Shaylyn Romney Garrett, *The Upswing: How America Came Together a Century Ago and How We Can Do It Again* (Simon & Schuster: 2020).

[9] Elinor Ostrom, "Crossing the Great Divide: Coproduction, synergy, and development," World Development, Elsevier Science Ltd., 1996.

[10] Research on this point is discussed in more depth in: Shayne Kavanagh and Vincent Reitano, "Financial Foundations for Thriving Communities," GFOA, 2020.

[11] Cary Funk, Alec Tyson, Brian Kennedy, and Courtney Johnson, "Science and Scientists Held in High Esteem Across Global Publics: 1. Scientists are among the most trusted groups in society, though many value practical experience over expertise," Pew Research Center, 2020.

[12] Examples include providing daycare, compensation for travel, or even time, holding the event in a convenient location and time, and holding the event in a location that is inviting to participants.

[13] See for example the July 22 Gallup and June 11 YouGov surveys.

[14] For research on this point, see Chapter 2, Tina Nabatchi and Matt Leighninger, *Public Participation for 21st Century Democracy* (Jossey-Bass:2015).

PART 3

How Local Government Can Help the Public Engage with Complexity

Local government can do a lot to help the public engage with complexity, recognize the nuances of problems, and get past us (the public) versus them (public officials). One strategy is to engage the public in defining the problem. People often want to jump to solutions, but that often results in solutions that treat symptoms and ignore root causes. The GFOA paper, "Defining the Problem: The Missing Piece to Local Government Planning" (gfoa.org), describes a method called "turn the curve planning" that can be used to engage stakeholders in defining the problem.

Another technique is "deliberative community forums," which discover what people think about an issue after they have engaged with multiple, alternative viewpoints. The forums provide the resources citizens need to develop an opinion informed by relevant facts, expert information, and an understanding of how issues and policies affect others in their community.[1] Some steps of a deliberative community forum include the following.

1 **Choose the issue the forum will address and recruit a diverse group of participants.** Participants should include people who are affected by the issue and changes that may occur in the community as a result of addressing the issue as well as those who may be part of the changes. Efforts should be made to engage those who may not normally engage or be included, which can require added resources or special planning. Engaging a group of people with diverse perspectives helps make sense of the issue by describing it fully and putting it in context.[2] Strategies to help engage a diverse group include holding the public engagement event near where people live and in a space they are comfortable with, and providing childcare services, travel assistance, or translation services when necessary.

2 **Efforts should focus on gathering a clear sense of the issue from the public and content experts, often resulting in a discussion guide or backgrounder that can be used for others to engage with and refine.** The diverse views and perspectives held by the public can be gathered from conventional sources such as surveys, citizen comments, and communications to elected officials or staff. Those perspectives are filtered and combined with subject matter expertise to create substantive materials for the public to engage with around the issue that is the subject of the forum. These materials could include a background set of facts but should not be limited to that—the materials need to frame values and trade-offs in play and lay out key questions for participants to engage. These discussion guides or backgrounders provide a baseline of information as well as lay out the tough choices and trade-offs inherent to the issue. They make it clear that there is no

magic bullet that will solve the issue, setting the public up well for the robust conversation that is warranted. These materials are designed to help overcome the human tendency toward simple solutions and avoiding tensions.

3 **Participants engage in small group discussions facilitated by trained moderators, guided by the discussion guide/background material.** Small groups work together to not only identify what actions they prefer or would reject (and what trade-offs they are willing or unwilling to accept) but also to improve the background document, which becomes a shared project that is improved through each engagement. Participants highlight what they liked, what they want to push back on, and what is missing. Organizers work to refine the document between events.

4 **Insights gathered from the public discussions can be filtered back through subject matter experts to check for misinformation and explore new possibilities.** One way is to have experts on hand to answer participants' questions during the event. This could include government staff but could also involve outside experts. Another way is to engage experts afterward to respond to what was learned from the public process. Over time, a cycle of engaging experts and the public continues in an interaction that improves the background document and sharpens the decision-making at the public or council level.[3] But expert views can't be allowed to dominate the event, either explicitly (experts talking too much) or implicitly (creating a presence that might inhibit conversation). For example, conversation can be impeded by too many staff members who are marked as experts by uniforms or experts being seated on a raised platform.

5 **Deliberative processes should lead to action, but action can take many forms.** The actions coming out of a deliberative process may involve official decisions, but they can also require actions by individuals or groups in the community. New organizations may form, or existing organizations may adapt the way they approach the issue. Ideally, collaborations form across public, private, and nonprofit sectors to address the issue. Such actions, however, should not be the conclusion of a deliberative process. Actions may change the dynamics of an issue, hopefully improving the ways in which tensions are negotiated and the community's values are honored—but rarely are problems solved in the sense that the problem is no longer an issue. The conversation is ongoing, interrupted by new actions and ideas that change its dynamics.

Finally, a point about how not to engage with complexity: Avoid the temptation to oversimplify complex situations—that is, fitting complex problems into categories.[4] Making a binary choice out of a complex problem (by, say, issuing a referendum) is the most potentially damaging thing to do. It forces people to pick a side and discourages them from investigating the nuances of complex problems. Similarly, don't highlight or emphasize the risks faced by certain groups, inviting an "us versus them" mentality. Doing this reenforces a person's identity as a member of a group that has a position or stake in the issue. Instead, try to activate a shared identity of being part of a larger group that is jointly seeking solutions to a shared problem. As an example, research suggests that when public safety executives (such as, a fire or police chief) come to a budgeting meeting in their uniforms, their identity as a police officer or a firefighter is activated. This makes them more likely to push for decisions that benefit their department. Conversely, if they come dressed in civilian clothing, like everyone else, it activates their identity as a member of the broader local government, which encourages decisions that benefit that group.[5]

Engaging a group of people with diverse perspectives helps make sense of the issue by describing it fully and putting it in context.

[1] Description of deliberative community forums from: "A Handbook for Deliberative Community Forums," prepared for the City of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, by the Program for Deliberative Democracy, Carnegie Mellon University, and The Art of Democracy.

[2] Will Friedman, "Reframing 'Framing,'" Center for Advances in Public Engagement, 2020.

[3] Martin Carcasson and Leah Sprain, "Beyond problem solving: Reconceptualizing the work of public deliberation as deliberative inquiry," Communication Theory, 26(1), 2016.

[4] Amanda Ripley, High Conflict: Why We Get Trapped and How We Get Out (Simon and Schuster: 2021).

[5] Jay Van Bavel and Dominic Packer, The Power of Us: Harnessing Our Shared Identities to Improve Performance, Increase Cooperation, and Promote Social Harmony (Little, Brown Spark: 2021).

PART 4

Fostering a Politics of Co-Creation

Co-creation techniques can be used to push back against the politics of cynicism, as Principle 5 suggests. This can feel like a daunting task, but there are several methods you can use to keep your government's public engagement efforts on track.

One approach to co-creation is asking citizens to define the values that will be used to help navigate and negotiate the trade-offs demanded by complex problems. Professional administrators are not well placed to define those values on behalf of the public. It might be difficult, if not impossible, for the public to come to consensus around any given programmatic solution, especially at the outset of public engagement. It will be less difficult to come to an agreement on the positive, constructive values that should guide decision-making. In our polarized political environment, many people will be surprised to find that they can reach common ground on values with people who hold different positions on a given issue.

One of the leading psychological theories on why people disagree about politics is moral foundations theory (MoralFoundations.org). It tells us that there are six fundamental moral building blocks that form the basis of an individual's ethics. Everyone has the same building blocks but emphasizes them differently when applying them to ethical decisions and political positions. Let's consider police and public safety as an example—a controversial topic in some communities. Citizens can differ on their position about the right amount of resources devoted to policing versus other types of public safety strategies, but they can probably agree on certain values—that people should feel safe from harm, for example, and that law enforcement should treat people fairly. An aversion to seeing harm done to others and fair treatment for everyone are two of the six moral foundations.

The limitation of these approaches is that sometimes conflicts need to be addressed head-on. A technique called "polarity management" can help. Continuing with our police budget example, the debate may seem to about increasing or decreasing the police budget. We know that a compromise between these two positions may be ineffective if it is even possible.

Polarity management is a process of acknowledging and leveraging different and incompatible viewpoints.[1] Leveraging a polarity involves understanding the limits of "either/or" thinking. Polarity thinking involves embracing "both/and" thinking because, over time, both poles (for example, solutions) are needed. Polarity thinking allows a team to articulate and record multiple viewpoints and then strategize to maximize the benefits and minimize the negative facets of both poles. This shifts conversations from an adversarial frame to a collaborative one that can support creativity and co-creation. Former adversaries suddenly find themselves in agreement about needing to focus on achieving the upside of each pole and avoiding the downside.

For example, some people in the community might be concerned with deterring crime, so they want a large law enforcement presence. Other people might be concerned with engaging the community in public safety, including exploring alternatives to traditional policing. These might seem to be

incompatible positions, but polarity management can be used to see how both perspectives can contribute to the goal of a community that is safe and feels safe.

Exhibit 1 shows a sample polarity map (a tool that can be used for polarity management). The common goal of a safe community is at the top. The positive and negative implications of each polarity (law enforcement versus community engagement) are then explored on the left and right sides, respectively. The map is used to find action steps that can promote the positive implications of each polarity, and to identify warning signs that the community may be overemphasizing one polarity or the other. A map like this can help the advocates of each polarity see how they can work together with the other side toward a common goal.

The Participatory Budgeting Project (participatorybudgeting.org) is another approach to engaging citizens in co-creation. In participatory budgeting, a set amount of money is made available for a defined segment of the community (such as a neighborhood). Next, members of that community are invited to produce ideas for projects to improve their community. Community members then vote on the ideas, and the winning projects are funded up to the amount made available by the local government. Participatory budgeting puts citizens in

EXHIBIT 1 | SAMPLE POLARITY MAP

Greater Purpose Statement (GPS) – Why leverage this polarity?

A community that is safe and feels safe

ACTION STEPS

How will we gain or maintain the positive results from focusing on this left pole? What? Who? By When? Measures?

A. Ensure police transparency to increase trust
B. Police proactively build relationships with key community leaders
C. Review existing laws and policies to ensure they are just and fair

EARLY WARNINGS

Measurable indicators (things you can count) that will let you know that you are getting into the downside of this left pole.

A. Decreased trust and increased fear in the community
B. Increasing complaints of police abuse of power

Values = positive results of focus on the left pole

- Reduction of crime and victimization
- Increased sense of safety
- Community pride and positive reputation

Law Enforcement

- Individual rights are compromised, police state
- Polarized community between those with power and those without power
- Law enforcement is remedial and not preventative

Fears = negative results of over-focus on the left pole to the neglect of the right pole

AND

Values = positive results of focus on the right pole

- Reduced conflict between police and community members
- Increased respect
- Police and citizens partner in creating a safe community

Community Engagement

- Lose the big picture of community/police safety
- Lack of accountability for individuals and lack of justice for victims
- Police lack support and resources to keep community safe

Fears = negative results of over-focus on the right pole to the neglect of the left pole

ACTION STEPS

How will we gain or maintain the positive results from focusing on this right pole? What? Who? By When? Measures?

A. Invest in high quality community engagement
B. Explore alternatives to traditional policing methods
C. Build partnerships across disciplines and sectors focused on community safety

EARLY WARNINGS

Measurable indicators (things you can count) that will let you know that you are getting into the downside of this right pole.

A. Police feel unable to do their jobs — reflected in police turnover, absenteeism...
B. Increase in crime rate

Rampant crime and distrust and fear of police

Deeper Fear – Loss of GPS

Polarity thinking allows a team to articulate and record multiple viewpoints and then strategize to maximize the benefits and minimize the negative facets of both poles.

charge of deciding how to use money to make a visible impact where they live. The advantage is that citizens play a leading role in a process for deciding how to use public money, including seeing the real-life impact. The downside is that it is limited to a small portion of the local government budget and may not provide much guidance to elected officials on larger questions of budget policy.

Finally, the most ambitious form of co-creation is to engage organizations from outside of government to address complex problems. The public can be involved in co-creating an inspiring vision for their community, which then serves to convene organizations from across the community around making the vision a reality. Thousands of citizens in the City of San Antonio, Texas, took part in creating San Antonio 2020 (sa2020.org). Several public, private, and nonprofit organizations are active participants in moving the vision forward toward reality. The vision has had staying power: it has survived three changes in mayoral administrations. Collaboration across the community to form and maintain the vision has been essential to the vision's longevity.[2]

In the end, public engagement often hinges on what role you are asking or allowing citizens to play. If you provide opportunities for them to complain, you will hear complaints. If you let them react to proposals developed without their input, those who support the proposals are likely to stay home, and those who do not stay home will show up in force to complain and express their cynicism. But if you engage them as collaborative problem-solvers, you may activate a more productive form of participation that not only leads to better ideas but also is likely to spark their continued support through implementation.

[1] Barry Johnson, *Polarity Management: Identifying and Managing Unsolvable Problems* (HRD Press: 2014).

[2] You can read more about San Antonio's vision and comparable efforts in other communities here: Shayne Kavanagh, "Network Enterprises—An Information Age Solution to Enduring Problems?" GFOA, November 2020.

Though it will not be easy, local government can play a role in restoring a sense of community, belonging, and trust.

Conclusion

Local governments have entered a period that is unprecedented in the post-World War II era, characterized by challenges to democratic governance. Chief among them might be the fracturing of the public into rival groups, which encourages blaming others for problems rather than jointly seeking solutions. There is also widespread distrust of institutions, with government being no exception. But at the same time, there are unrealistic expectations for what government can accomplish, with disappointment in government usually being the result. All of this contributes to a politics of cynicism, which offers opposition to the status quo as a rallying point, but which offers no solutions for the way forward.

Though it will not be easy, local government can play a role in restoring a sense of community, belonging, and trust. In fact, though the current conditions are unprecedented in the last 70 years, they are not unprecedented in American history. The esteemed sociologist Robert Putnam points out that in the late 1800s and early 1900s, America was in a position not so different from today in terms of polarization, distrust, cynicism, and more.

What was known as the "progressive era" of reform in the 1920s saw changes in American society that helped reverse these maladies. One of those changes was the reform of local government to the institutions we have now. In fact, GFOA was created as part of the progressive era reforms of local government. Another of those changes was a civic revival, characterized by active citizenship and pursuit of pragmatic, not ideological, solutions to complex problems.[1] Today's local governments could contribute to a similar reversal of today's social ills by encouraging high-quality public engagement that gives citizens the opportunity to be part of meaningful conversations about the future of their community and take responsibility for bringing those plans to fruition.

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[1] Robert D. Putnam and Shaylyn Romney Garrett, The Upswing: How America Came Together a Century Ago and How We Can Do It Again (Simon & Schuster: 2020). We will also note that these reforms were not invented from nowhere—they built upon prior traditions in American political and social life.