

On the Conduct of Forums: Community Invention

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These reflections on the conduct of forums are based on participation in the Chicago Innovations Forums during the past five years. The Chicago Innovations Forums is a project of the Center for Urban Affairs and Policy Research of Northwestern University. The forums, held at the Woodstock Center, a small conference center northwest of Chicago, or at Norris Center of the Evanston campus, are a unique meeting place where diverse people and interests from Chicago neighborhoods, associations, and institutions gather to explore new opportunities for pursuing justice, equity, and productivity in the policies and practices of civic institutions in the Chicago area.

History and Purpose

The Chicago Innovations Forums were started by the Center for Urban Affairs and Policy Research of Northwestern University in 1987 with a grant from the Sylvia and Aaron Scheinfeld Foundation. John L. McKnight and Stanley J. Hallett are co-directors of the Forum and Romelle Moore-Robinson is the coordinator.

The Center and the Scheinfeld Foundation were both interested in connecting research and policy work with the civic agendas of Chicago groups, particularly those with a neighborhood constituency base. The forums, it was hoped, would provide a way of advancing a policy agenda by connecting it with the experiences and interests of community groups. They would provide a way to test ideas and possibilities for action within and between such groups. This matched the long-standing interest of the foundation in bringing diverse groups together to explore new ways of acting in the pursuit of justice in the city.

At the time the forums started in 1987, Harold Washington was mayor of Chicago. City government was open to ideas and neighborhood initiatives in a way that was unprecedented in recent Chicago history. But the neighborhood groups had traditionally worked on independent agendas in isolation from each other. And they had opposed externally imposed programs more than they had generated internal community development. They found it difficult to match the openness of the administration with the imaginative proposals. Further, the neighborhood organizations reflected the racial and ethnic divisions of the city and lacked the occasions to explore possibilities for a common agenda.

Since 1987, the scene in the city has changed dramatically. New administrations brought changing priorities. Citizen and corporate efforts created dramatic realignments of power and authority in the Chicago public schools. Federal resources for such programs as moderate income housing have declined. A depressed economy has had devastating impacts on work and income opportunities in some Chicago neighborhoods. The drug trade has emerged as a powerful factor in many neighborhoods.

Along with these changes, however, new capacities and vitalities have emerged. Coalitions of neighborhood groups have been strengthened. Community organizers are redefining their roles. A variety of skills are employed in housing rehabilitation, commercial and industrial improvements, energy conservation, credit management, and leadership training. Civic associations and community organizations have continued to press to open the flow of

information about such matters as city capital budgets. Many such groups, having fought for school reform, are now playing new roles in preparing neighborhood leaders for new tasks in improving local schools.

These and other developments have been the focus of the forums. The directions and strategies for change are explored at the forums. After some forums, staff of the forums have assisted in taking the first action steps, and played a supportive role in building a network of relationships needed to carry the action forward.

Among the continuing purposes of the forums is the opportunity for people who do not know each other to get acquainted, to come to understand the perspectives and interests of other groups, and to form friendships and alliances. The significance of this opportunity is easy to underestimate. Supporting and nurturing networks of relationships have proven vital to maintaining goodwill and shaping new topics for forums.

Some seasoned observers have noted that a richer, more inclusive civic culture is overcoming the traditional isolation and limited interests of neighborhood organizations. While there are a variety of factors producing this result, it is evident that the forums are playing an important role.

Forums need to be distinguished from “meetings.” Meetings differ from forums in roles, relationships, agendas and outcomes. In most meetings, the roles are defined by organizational structures. Some people occupy roles with power, authority, and resources at their command. Other participants are subordinated, lacking power and control. Their ideas may be invited, up to a point, but their acquiescence can be counted on once those in power make a decision.

The judgments of the subordinated participants generally are about “how” to get something done. But what is “worth doing,” or what purposes are worth pursuing, is either taken for granted or defined by those with power.

It is interesting to note that Aristotle defined a “citizen” as one who participates in power – the power to shape the civic purposes. In contrast, the “metics” were technocrats of his day, who had the technical skills to get things done. Unlike the citizens, they had no voice in deciding what was worth doing.

Most meetings are discussions of the “how to” questions. The outcomes are decisions about allocations of authority and resources to “work plans” aimed at getting something done.

Forums are composed of participants who share a fundamental equality. The underlying assumption is that each participant is free to arrive at his or her independent judgment about what is worth doing. In this sense, they are empowered.

Participants, however, do “represent” constituencies. They consider civic issues and purposes in terms of whether or not they are likely to be taken up by the constituencies. In this dual

relationship, personal autonomy and constituency representation, they are called upon to make political judgments. A forum in which participants can share their judgments about constituency interests, and listen to similar informed judgments about other constituencies, is a fertile seedbed for creative thought. Out of such forums can come the inventions needed for expanding the range of political possibility.

The outcomes of such forums are seldom the detailed work plans needed to enlist constituencies, get resources, or take other forms of public action or mobilize administrative procedures. Rather, the outcomes are clarification of purposes and principles and wiser political judgments needed to produce significant change in the city.

Forums and meetings each have their place in civic life. But endless meetings trying to get something done without the fundamental reexamination of what is worth doing can sap the strength of civic life. A good forum provides the occasion for examining new situations, assessing new possibilities, clarifying new purposes, and finding new allies.

We have reflected on our experience in conducting the Chicago Innovation Forums. Out of this experience, we have tried to identify some of the important things we have learned about how to create forums that nurture the imagination, creativity, and springs of action in civic life.

LEARNING FROM THE FORUMS

The organizing of a forum is a civic art that differs from the dominant styles of one-way communication via the media or lectures and presentations. Rather, the forum is a way in which people can engage each other in the foundational tasks of citizenship. In a period of rapid change in our civic life, we believe that the rediscovery and creation of the forum itself is an important task.

We have conducted thirty-four Innovation Forums during the past five years. During that time we have participated, watched, and reflected on what makes some forums work better than others. The following is a record of some of the things that we have learned and now apply to forums that we organize. These observations or judgments about what is needed to create an inventive and productive forum are not a recipe or formula. Rather, they are guidelines that we have found useful.

Selection of Topics

Proposals for topics or issues for Chicago Innovation Forums come from a variety of sources. Some grow out of discussions among forum staff. Some are suggested at meetings of the Advisory Council established in the third year of the forums. Others emerge from discussions with community groups. A topic may be suggested when we hear someone at a meeting say, "This requires more in-depth discussion than we can give it at this meeting, and we need some other people around the table. Let's see if we can have an Innovation Forum on this topic."

The following are guidelines in the selection of topics:

1. The topics need to grow out of the working definitions in use by neighborhood groups, rather than academic jargon. They should reflect changing conditions, perceptions of new opportunities, and a desire to chart new courses of action.
2. The topics need to invite the participation of people who generally are not in the conversation with each other, who see the issues from different perspectives and who describe the topics or problems in different ways.
3. The topics are most useful when the normal meetings of groups or coalitions don't allow for in-depth discussion and re-examination of purposes and options.
4. Initial proposals for topics get tested and reshaped by forum staff usually in conversations with small representative groups of people.

Framing an Issue

Urban issues traditionally get defined as categorical problem areas, such as health, education or security. This way of framing issues then drifts into discussions of actions required from managers or professionals in large bureaucratic organizations. The very definition of the problem carries with it assumptions about who the appropriate actors are. And in most discussions of urban issues, citizens are seen as playing marginal bit parts.

The web of concerns that emerge in neighborhood life, however, do not separate themselves easily into categories. Most "categorical" discussions are based on the "institutional assumption" that health, education and security, for instance, are the prerogatives of hospitals, schools and police. Remedies for problems based on the institutional assumptions usually call for expanded institutional authority and more resources to be consumed by the institutions. When studies of the impact of these remedies were reviewed in a series of investigations at the Center for Urban Affairs and Policy Research, we found that changes in these institutions seldom result in improved health status, better educated communities, or increased security.

The Innovations Forums operate out of a different perspective. In contrast to categorical definitions, we have started with the assumption that the discussions will be about *actions by citizens*. For instance, the forum discussion about drug problems was not a "war on drugs" that implies action by police and schools, but rather, about "neighborhood responses to the drug trade."

This citizens' view recognizes that the people with most stake in the vitality of the neighborhoods are the people who live there. Policy discussions, then, begin from a different set of assumptions:

1. People and their associations in neighborhoods are best able to judge whether or not the quality of life is improving or deteriorating.

2. Citizens and their associations or organizations are best able to discuss and shape policies that increase their capacities to take action to improve their neighborhoods.
3. Neighborhood associations need expanded capacities including authority, control of financial resources, tools and techniques in order to take effective action.
4. Coalitions are needed in order to advocate for policies of public and private institutions at the city, state, and federal levels that are supportive of neighborhood efforts.
5. Criticizing, clarifying and constituting civic purposes that are grounded in but not limited to the neighborhood level is an ongoing task of citizen associations.
6. This task requires forums in which experience can be reviewed, purposes clarified and shared, and invention of new forms of action and institutional arrangements, policies and practices can emerge.

This alternative set of assumptions which underlie the framing issues for discussions at the Chicago Innovations Forums looks at the web of urban concerns not as managerial or professional problems, but as tasks of citizens. This is not to suggest that managerial and professional problems do not exist. Nor does it mean that there is no place in civic life for discussions of such problems. But meeting the larger challenge of important civic changes starts with building the strength and vitality of citizen associations and organizations.

Timing

Deciding when a topic is appropriate for a forum is nearly as important as shaping the topic.

1. The timing of the forums is of critical importance since they most usefully occur when the awareness and concern by participants is high, but there is uncertainty about what courses of action are most appropriate.
2. The timing needs to take into consideration the flow of events so that the pressure for acting is present and appropriate action is still possible.

Setting

The place where the forums are held is important. A remote, comfortable, attractive setting that fits the size of the group has proven to be an important element in establishing an atmosphere that encourages participation and gives people an opportunity to relax and focus on the issue at hand.

The forums are generally overnight, starting with lunch one day and closing with lunch the next day. Considerable care has been taken in room assignments. Since accommodations require two persons to a room, it provides an opportunity to examine the participation list from the point of view of who would both enjoy and benefit from sharing a room overnight. In addition, participants are encouraged to make new friends by their choices of meal partners. These

small details are significant in extending the network of relationships that develop from the forums.

Participation

Deciding who should participate in a particular forum is critical.

1. The selection of participants needs to be carefully tailored to the topics so that relevant experiences and perspectives can be shared and the possibilities of common action explored.
2. The sponsorship by an independent organization such as the Center for Urban Affairs and Policy Research of Northwestern University, which is not going to compete with the various groups in the field of action, is useful in getting participation by various parties and providing a “fair” arena for discussion and deliberation.
3. The opportunity for people to talk off-the-record as equals and as individuals rather than just as “representatives” of fixed institutional positions is vital to the creative exploration of new possibilities for action.
4. Foundation representatives regularly come to the forums. It allows them to discuss and learn about some of the issues, and to see grantees outside of the normal grant-making relationship.

Structure of Discussion

The discussions at the forums need to be carefully organized.

1. The orienting or opening session should provide an overall perspective on the history and current dimensions of the topic or issue.
2. The possibilities of action need to be enriched by learning of the experience of other groups in other cities.
3. It is important that the whole group hear from each of the major groups around the table about their experience, perspectives, and interest.
4. There should be time for general exploration and testing of ideas, interests, and potential actions, and this generally requires that smaller groups work on various aspects of the topic or issue.
5. The forum needs to provide opportunity for groups to clarify principles of action, directions, and roles and, in some cases, to identify next steps.

Continuity or Outcomes

In order for forums to have significant outcomes, several factors must be present.

1. For creative action to emerge from a forum, those present need to know whether or not there are potential resources required to take action. It is useful to have representatives of foundations present who may be willing to assist in getting such resources.
2. Based on the proposed actions, the participants in the forum need to identify themselves and their interest in subsequent meetings to shape more detailed proposals or carry forward the action.
3. In some cases where unusual ideas have been proposed, it is important that people and groups have time to think about the discussion, to test ideas, and to clarify their interests and capacities even though this means that the outcomes may not be immediately visible.
4. The Chicago Innovations Forum has found it useful to offer to provide a “secretariat” function to serve as convener for the first follow-up session. In addition, forum staff, particularly the coordinator, play an important role in sustaining and nurturing the relationships developed at the forums. New forum ideas grow out of this work. This is particularly true in the case of the follow-on forums of the Greening Network, the Campaign for a Drug Free West Side, and the Chicago Association of Local School Councils during 1991.

Process Learnings

The underlying organization of the forums needs to take into consideration several dimensions of the process.

1. It is important to have a small representative group (a steering committee) participating with forum personnel in making decisions about the flow of the discussion, structure and focus of small groups, etc., so that the time can be wisely used and not wasted in procedural or agenda hassles.
2. The forum needs to allow each person to establish his or her identity, interests, and perspectives in the group sessions as a way of taking ownership of the discussion and action; or put another way, most people need to be heard as a condition of being able to listen.
3. The forum needs to give visual representation to ideas, proposals, perspectives, as a way of helping people to continually orient themselves in the discussion and to be sure that what they think is important is being taken seriously. Newsprint is cheap but effective.
4. A good forum depends on the practiced art of leadership of discussions including the ability to identify and clarify key elements, to limit repetition or domination, and to let

people know that they will have a role to play at a specific time; that is, to allow people to relax and listen because they know they will have an occasion to speak.

5. The forums need to allow for informal discussion between sessions, at meals, and at a social occasion following the evening session, particularly when people are meeting for the first time.
6. The forums need to allow time for each of the above steps. A twenty-six hour time period (lunch through lunch) seems to work.
7. Conflicts need to surface so that they can be dealt with openly, directly, and resolved if possible, allowed to remain as part of future work, or accepted as legitimate differences.
8. After a first forum where the above has been accomplished, a "mini-forum" or one-day session back in the city has worked well to formulate more specific directions and actions.

Building Relationships

The advance work of meeting one-on-one with potential forum participants, and the follow-up work that maintains and builds relationships of trust is vital to the conduct of forums. This is time consuming, requires unusual talents, and is harder to measure than some other parts of the process. But we are convinced that it is out of this work that the Chicago Innovations Forums have developed their capacity to play a creative role in the life of the city and its neighborhoods.

SUMMARY

Some political philosophers such as Hannah Arendt have argued that the forum is to the body politic what the mind is to the body. It is the place where experiences can be drawn together, alternatives explored, and new courses of action devised.

In an age dominated by electronic media, civic forums are not in good shape. For most of urban America, there are no town meetings. The conduct of neighborhood life is left to managerial and professional processes. Citizens are allowed in after they have been stripped of authority. Citizenship is reduced to the occasional pulling of a lever that is then used to justify the designation of authority to some remote delegate.

In this setting, the rebuilding of forums is a primary task. It might be described as creating social "infrastructure." If the primary task of citizens associations is to *criticize, clarify, and constitute civic purposes*, then the work of forums is the primary tool needed for that task.

The creation and leadership of forums is clearly more of an art than a science. It calls for processes in which people can both listen and be heard. It calls for the exercise of a rare but vital civic virtue, magnanimity, that takes seriously the experience and the language of the most

diverse groups of people. And it calls for the peculiar kind of courage that the Athenians called political courage. Pericles put it best when he said, "We in our own persons make our decisions on policy or submit them to proper discussions. For we do not think that there is an incompatibility between words and deeds. The worst thing is to rush into action before the consequences have been properly debated. We are capable at the same time of taking risks and of estimating them beforehand. Others are brave out of ignorance and when they stop to think, they begin to fear. But the person who can most truly be counted brave knows best the meaning of what is sweet in life, of what is terrible, and then goes out, undeterred, to meet what is to come."

Forums provide not a substitute but a preparation for action. They provide the opportunity for citizens to ask the first question: "What is worth doing?"

CHICAGO INNOVATION FORUMS 1987-1992

The Place of Local Community Organizations in Decisions About City Expenditures in Their Neighborhoods – July 16-17, 1987

Building a New School/Community Partnership through the Participation of Local Schools in Economic and Community Revitalization of Their Neighborhoods – September 17-18, 1987

Organizing for Chicago School Reform – November 12-13, 1987

The Neighborhoods' Options in the Energy Crisis – January 14-15, 1988

Neighborhood Economic Interests in Chicago's Mandatory Waste Separation Ordinance – March 17-18, 1988

Developing an Affordable Housing Agenda for the Nineties – May 19-20, 1988

Illinois School Reform Legislation Bill #18-39 – July 29-30, 1988

Credit Unions as a Tool for Community Development – September 22-23, 1988

Rethinking the Welfare Dollar: New Initiatives by Local Community Groups – November 30-December 1, 1988

Issues in Local Ownership and Control: The Prospects for Community Land Trusts in Chicago Neighborhoods – February 9-10 1989

Neighborhood Responses to the Drug Trade – March 30-31, 1989

Expanding Opportunities and Creating Community Change Through Small Groups – May 11-12, 1989

New Directions in Community Strategic Planning: Thinking Through and Taking Charge – July 17-18, 1989

New Directions in Community Organizing – September 13-14, 1989

Local Community Stakes in State Economic Development Policies and Programs: Building an Agenda for the Future – January 25-26, 1990

Community Gardening: A Community Building Tool – February 1-2, 1990

The Role of Community Organizing in Chicago Public School Reform – March 28-29, 1990

Neighborhood Initiatives for Improved Transit to Work – May 15-16, 1990

The Future of Neighborhood Health Planning for Chicago's West Side Corridor – July 25-26, 1990

Developing a Comprehensive Plan for Chicago Westside Strategy on Drugs – August 23-24, 1990

Building a Neighborhood Agenda – September 27, 1990

Neighborhood Capital Budget Group Board/Staff Annual Retreat – December 7, 1990

Neighborhood Innovations in Financial Services as a Base for Community Economic Development – January 17-18, 1991

Resources for the Neighborhood Agenda – March 7, 1991

Public Policy Development for the Campaign for a Drug-Free Westside: Strengthening Prevention, Treatment and Enforcement – March 14-15, 1991

The Greening Network: Past-Present-Future – March 21, 1991

Strategies on Developing a Chicago Association of Local School Councils – June 11-12, 1991

Planning for the Comprehensive Housing Affordability Strategy for the City of Chicago – August 8-9, 1991

Exploring Governmental Initiatives for the Neighborhood Agenda – September 26-27, 1991

Exploring Women's Initiatives to Build Multicultural Relationships in Chicago – December 5-6, 1991

Chicago: Where Have We Been? Where are We? Where Do We Want to Go? – February 19-20, 1992

Community Policing: Where Do We Go From Here? – May 19-20, 1992

Youth Policy Forum I – July 22, 1992

Youth Policy Forum II – August 11-12, 1992