

# **Innovations in Public Participation: Neighborhood Assemblies Network**

## *Moving Large and Diverse Communities to Shared Vision and Action*

**Exciting new approaches to public participation** are helping communities around the world build common ground, reduce conflict and work together more effectively. At the center of these new approaches are innovative “large group methods” that enable highly-diverse stakeholders to collaborate in groups involving up to thousands of people.

### **“Large group methods” and the Neighborhood Assemblies Network (NAN)**

Many of the large-group methods go by specific names, such as World Café, Open Space Technology, Future Search, Whole Scale Change, Appreciative Inquiry, etc. Drawing from such methods and working from their underlying principles, NAN collaborates with communities around the world to design custom-tailored processes that meet their needs.

### **What makes the new collaboration processes different? – Eight points of distinction**

The new processes are designed to create “collective intelligence” from many diverse interests and perspectives.

1. **Fully inclusive.** Multi-stakeholder planning teams are created to assure participation from all sectors and demographics. The process doesn’t start until all relevant voices are involved.
2. **Scalable.** The new processes can accommodate dozens, hundreds, even thousands of people without reducing the quality or effectiveness of the dialogue, and without limiting individual participation. Having more people involved becomes an asset rather than a liability.
3. **Everyone participates equally.** The separation between the people on stage and the audience is eliminated. No one gives up authority, power or expertise, yet everyone has an equal place at the table. People work in distributed, self-managing small groups that work in parallel and report to the whole at intervals. The whole then makes meaning of the work of these small groups. Everyone is involved in doing the work, raising the breadth and quality of collectively-generated understanding, and increasing the capacity for shared action.
4. **Holistic.** These approaches build relationships and coordination between many diverse issues and stakeholder groups. A “big picture” emerges from the equal contribution of all voices before action is proposed on any part, creating a context for wise thinking and broad buy-in.
5. **Real dialogue.** Everyone gets a chance to speak and be heard in give-and-take dialogue and shared inquiry. Diverse stakeholder and demographic groups work as peers to frame the issues together. People experience themselves and others as whole persons, not merely as representatives of an interest or office, bringing more humanity into the room.
6. **Common-ground and action focus.** The focus is on discovering shared goals and acting to implement them. Communities learn they can still move forward together, despite acknowledged conflicts and unresolved disagreements.
7. **Simple and low-cost.** Implementing the new large-group processes is straightforward, relatively easy to learn and does not require any special tools or technologies.
8. **Energizing and enjoyable.** Unlike traditional meetings that deplete energy and exhaust patience, the new techniques excite and energize, because people have a chance to talk, be themselves, take responsibility and act effectively.

### **What outcomes can be expected?**

With these new approaches, communities build a shared vision that grows from and connects all perspectives, and that everyone supports. The focus at each step is on the actions the group will take to implement the common ground they have discovered. People learn that truly-collaborative processes are smarter, more productive and more efficient than hierarchies and top-down decision-making structures. Government, business and communities can become allies instead of adversaries. Including all voices and working collaboratively takes more planning time up front, but assures higher-quality outcomes and speedier implementation -- in short, a smoother, faster process that works better and feels better.

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