The Role of Narrative Building in Public Deliberation

The Open Government Partnership's Practice Group on Dialogue and Deliberation

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Preface

Over the last 10 years, the OGP has developed a rich bank of data about open government reforms. This resource provides important insights into what works and what doesn't. But when we talk to people about our impact, try to persuade them to support our efforts, or inspire politicians to step up ambition, we often fall back on stories and narratives.

Storytelling accomplishes what data and analysis often cannot. It illustrates the complex and sometimes subtle connections between the causes of an issue, the reforms undertaken, and how people's everyday lives will be improved.

Narrative building also plays a vital role in fulfilling some favourite OGP catchphrases, such as 'connecting reformers inside and outside government', 'creating spaces for dialogue' or 'equal partnership between government and civil society'. We know that these spaces and dialogues lead to fruitful collaboration and real reform only if they are continuous, well designed, and open and respectful. Finding a shared purpose, truly listening to each other, and accommodating our differences are vital, but they can be challenging.

Narrative building is one of the most effective open government approaches to support this. As the paper states, a shared narrative 'can be a big asset when solving problems' by helping the participants to 'establish common ground.'

Narrative building is also an impressive tool for bringing people together to surface and begin to reconcile different understandings of an issue, its causes and effects, and the values and preferences we all bring to discussions about how we want our communities to look.

This paper provides an accessible introduction to the role of narrative building, offering inspiring examples and an easy 'how to' guide. We hope that it will help advance reforms that improve the way that governments serve their citizens. Readers who are keen to learn or do more, are encouraged to reach out to the OGP Support Unit or the members of the Practice Group, who will be pleased to provide information and advice.

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Executive Summary

What is narrative building?

"Narrative" may be among the most over-used words in the public policy lexicon. It gets bandied about by everyone from politicians and pundits to scholars and therapists. Do we really need a paper to explain why narrative is important for public deliberation? The answer is yes, perhaps more than ever.

Narrative uses literary devices, such as metaphors, images, mood, and dramatic tension, to make sense of complex situations and to help us navigate through them.

It also often plays a central role in shaping public policy debates. Those who engage in or report on these debates routinely comment on how narrative guides the public's views on an issue or how different sides employ competing narratives.

Take the climate change issue. While scientists agree that the rise in global temperature should be kept below 1.5 degrees Celsius, there is uncertainty about what an effective global plan requires – and that is where narratives come into play.

On one hand, many climate change activists build their story around the threat of disaster, insisting on the need for an immediate end to the use of fossil fuels. Communities whose livelihoods depend on hydrocarbons focus on variables in the science, such as new technologies to reduce GHG emissions or techniques for carbon capture. Their story is that a staged transition to renewable energy is the responsible course.

Public debate often takes competing narratives like these at face value. They are said to reflect different "sides of the story" and the public is encouraged to choose a side. The idea that everyone should pause, stand back, and try to get the "whole story" is barely broached. The assumption is that disagreement and opposition drive good decision-making.

The Open Government movement represents a break with this thinking. It promotes ideas such as co-design and citizen participation as stepping-stones to better decision-making and public policy. The motivating idea is that bringing people with different perspectives together is often a better way to solve issues than forcing them to choose sides.

This paper builds on that work. It shows how narrative building can make a major contribution to public deliberation. Basically, our idea is that the different sides to a story – the competing narratives – often can be brought together in a shared narrative, a bit like the pieces of a jigsaw puzzle; and that can be a big step forward. It reframes the issues in a way that establishes common ground and gets a productive discussion going on difficult tasks, such as balancing competing values.

A technique for balancing competing values

Public deliberation calls on participants to deal with issues objectively. They engage in careful reasoning that is supported by data and information and informed by knowledge and expertise. But participants are often also asked to balance conflicting values or interests. These disputes can't be resolved by evidence alone, the way disputes over facts can. Values introduce a subjective element.

Public deliberation provides little in the way of tools to resolve these tensions. Participants who disagree about values – perhaps profoundly – are asked to sit down together, stand apart from their subjective views and interests and try to find a reasonable and fair accommodation. This is not only difficult; it can be divisive, as we saw with the tensions between climate and economy. What standards should they use to guide their deliberation? Who gets to decide what counts as "reasonable and fair?"

Appealing to metaphors like "weighing" or injunctions to "accommodate and respect one another" adds little. While it sends the right message, telling participants what to do does not tell them how to do it.

By contrast, a shared narrative is a story that opponents create together, from the bottom up, through a deliberative process. This requires a conscious effort to stand back and try to see the bigger picture, rather than just their respective parts of it.

The participants start by listening to each other's stories. This not only builds trust, it clarifies how the subjective aspects of their experience – their values, interests, emotions, and so on – are intertwined with the situation.

Learning about their different experiences creates shared understandings and points of contact

between the competing narratives. It builds bridges. Special techniques help align the stories around these points of contact in ways that everyone can accept.

While this is not yet a solution to the policy issues – that comes later – it creates the common ground that participants need to begin discussing how to mitigate risks or balance competing values in ways that are more likely to be seen as respectful and fair.

The cases

This paper uses three case studies to illustrate key techniques and challenges in building a shared narrative:

1. The Mental Health 2K Project provides a simple illustration of how to get a group of participants to "build from the bottom-up" by following three basic steps:
   - Exchange stories
   - Identify and consolidate shared stories
   - Test and adjust the stories
2. The Ottawa Hospital looks at how the creation of a "master narrative" can help establish common ground. A master narrative unites various "sub-narratives" around a single, overarching goal, but it is more than just a goal. A master narrative tells a story that shows how these sub-narratives work together to maximize progress toward the goal.
3. Kenya's Building Bridges Initiative (BBI) provides a timely example of a large-scale engagement process. We use it to consider how narrative building allows a deliberative process to be scaled up to include large numbers of people.

Findings

Our study's findings on narrative building are summarized in five key points:

1. **Shared narratives are built from the bottom up:** The process starts by getting the parties to tell their stories and learn about the different experiences behind them. They then go on to compare their stories, sift through them to find points of contact, and work together to create a single shared narrative that both sides find acceptable.
2. **Narrative building Requires Deliberation:** While the goal is to integrate different stories within a single story – synthesis – this kind of narrative building also requires lots of analysis, including careful reasoning, the weighing of evidence, reliance on expert knowledge, and more.
3. **Truth, fairness, and respect are guiding principles of narrative building:** Where disagreements arise, the participants must explore and reconfigure their respective stories in new ways. For example, people may share stories that contain facts that others regard as false or values they see as biased or offensive. The process tests questionable facts and values against available evidence and appropriate codes. It weeds out the bad ones as different people's narratives are absorbed and consolidated within the larger, shared narrative that is emerging.
4. **Deliberation is both internal and external:** If a shared narrative is to resolve difficult tensions, the individuals affected must internalize it. External deliberation with others is not enough. Internalization requires deliberation within one's self: individuals reflect on, assess, compare, and weigh how the new narrative fits with those they have already internalized. Adjustments to the old ones may be required. In effect, internalization is a way of taking ownership of the new narrative by personally committing to its key messages. Only then is the shared narrative likely to affect the person's values and behavior and contribute to a lasting resolution of the issue.
5. **A shared narrative is not a panacea:** Stories usually contain tensions and conflicts – often deep and powerful ones. While a shared narrative may reposition key tensions between participants, it is unlikely to fully resolve them. That usually requires further deliberation in later stages of the process. Typically, narrative building happens in the early stages, before the participants turn to more focused questions, such as how to mitigate risks or decide how to balance two competing values. As attention shifts onto these other tasks, the shared narrative provides critical common ground to support and guide the discussion.

In sum, narrative building uses deliberation to create a shared story about the context around an issue. This story helps the participants recognize and understand the role that values play in their dispute and highlights other objectives or values that they share. A shared narrative thus establishes common ground and, ideally, allows the parties to start an informed and respectful discussion on how they can fairly accommodate their differences.

1. Introduction

"Narrative" may be among the most over-used words in the public policy lexicon. It gets bandied about by everyone from politicians and pundits to scholars and therapists. Do we really need a paper to explain why narrative is important for public deliberation? The answer is yes – perhaps more than ever. As we concluded in Volume I of this series on Deliberation:

> *'Storytelling…speaks to people's emotional intelligence as well as their intellect. It provides them with a mental picture of a new situation or environment (what is there, how it will work, what it will achieve) and gives them a visceral sense of what is at stake (what they are aspiring to, what challenges must be overcome to achieve it, how this will be done and who are their allies and adversaries).'*[1]

Storytelling is both a basic human skill and a social need. People can hear a story once and remember it, sometimes for the rest of their lives. Moreover, a good narrative "travels." People like to tell stories, talk about them, and hear new ones.

1. Open Government, Deliberation and Narrative Building

Open Government aims at making governments more transparent, accountable, and responsive to their citizens. "Co-design" or "co-creation" is a key open government tool that involves public dialogue, deliberation, and shared decision-making (see Sidebar 2). The OGP Practice Group is developing a methodology to support these efforts (see Footnote 1), and narrative building plays a key role in our approach.

Most importantly, narrative helps people understand the unknown and adjust to the unfamiliar. It uses literary devices, such as metaphors, images, mood, and dramatic tension, to make sense of complex situations and to help us navigate through them.

Take the idea of the COVID-19 pandemic as a war. The metaphor has been widely used, but not just as an evocative image. The war metaphor generates a script that tells people how to view and respond to the crisis, from treating the virus like an "invisible enemy" to answering the call to duty. It frames a story that gives order and meaning to a complex set of facts, values, priorities, and more.

And the script can be controversial. It suggests responses that many people question or even oppose, such as that the state should enforce social-distancing. So, narratives can unite people, but they can also divide them.

As Sidebar 1 notes, we see narrative building as an emerging opportunity for Open Government. While this paper is based on ideas that we introduced in our earlier volumes, our specific task here is to explore and describe a process that we call **narrative building**. It can be used in a deliberative process to create a **shared narrative** – and that can be a big asset when solving difficult issues. It helps establish the common ground that participants need to make progress.

The discussion in this paper is divided into three main parts. Section 2 sets the stage by explaining how narrative influences decision-making and why it matters for public deliberation. Sections 3, 4, and 5 then use case studies to highlight three important techniques for narrative building:

1. Building from the bottom up (Section3)
2. Defining a master narrative (Section 4)
3. Creating public ownership (Section 5)

These techniques can be used separately or combined within a singled "blended" process, which is explained in Section 5. The Findings and Conclusions summarizes the paper's findings with five key points on narrative building.

[1] See Deliberation: Getting Policy-Making Out from Behind Closed Doors, page 21. The OGP Practice Group on Dialogue and Deliberation launched The Deliberation Series in 2019 to document the Group's evolving approach to public deliberation. The Series is available at: https://www.opengovpartnership.org/documents/deliberation-getting-policy-making-out-from-behind-closed-doors/

2. What is narrative building?

Public deliberation processes call on participants to deal with issues objectively. They engage in careful reasoning that is supported by data and information and informed by knowledge and expertise. (Sidebar 2 further explains our use of the phrase "public deliberation.") But participants are often also asked to balance conflicting values or interests. These disputes can't be resolved by evidence alone, the way disputes over facts can. Values introduce a subjective element.

2. What is "Public Deliberation"

A word on what we mean by "public deliberation" is in order, as people use it differently. Our approach here follows our earlier publications, where "public deliberation" was contrasted with "public consultation." Public consultation provides citizens (and stakeholders) with an opportunity to present their views on an issue to government. Officials then retreat behind closed doors to "deliberate" over what they've heard, as they look for a solution.

Public deliberation opens those doors to give the participants a meaningful role in the deliberative phase of the process, such as weighing trade-offs, discussing priorities, and forming solutions. In doing so, they engage in far deeper and more meaningful ways than a consultative process would allow.

The approach is explained more fully in the appendix at the end of this paper and in Volume I of the Deliberation Series (see Footnote 1).

Take the issue of climate change. To address it, we must reduce greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions. However, many countries are heavily dependent on coal, oil, and/or natural gas. A rapid reduction in their use could throw a country's economy into a tailspin. Decision-makers thus struggle with how to "balance" concerns over the environment with concerns over people's livelihoods.

Finding the right balance requires reliable knowledge about the impact of new policies on weather patterns and the economy. Unfortunately, the facts and data available often aren't clear or complete enough to define where, exactly, the best balance lies. Judgement is required – and that is where values come into play.

Someone who puts a high value on preserving jobs will be more willing to live with the risk of melting glaciers than someone who cares passionately about the loss of coral reefs. So, even when these people are looking at the same studies and facts, they may draw conflicting conclusions about how best to respond.

Public deliberation provides little in the way of tools to resolve these tensions. Participants who disagree about values – perhaps profoundly – are asked to sit down together, stand apart from their subjective views and interests and try to find a reasonable and fair accommodation. This is not only difficult; it can be divisive. What standards should they use to guide their deliberation? Who gets to decide what counts as "reasonable and fair?"

Appealing to metaphors like "weighing" or injunctions to "accommodate and respect one another" adds little. While it sends the right message, telling participants what to do does not tell them how to do it.

3. The Tanzanian dialogues

The 2014 Tanzanian Dialogues engaged nearly 400 experts, stakeholders, and citizens in developing scenarios about "possible futures" for their country. These scenarios were then used to inform public discussion on a proposed new constitution. The process had three main stages:

1. **Awareness:** A starting point for the dialogue was established by creating scenarios that reflected a shared understanding of the country's state.
2. **Discovery:** Participants were asked to "Think the Unthinkable" by contemplating game-changing events, such as an end to foreign aid for Tanzania. How would Tanzanians cope with such a change?
3. **Choice:** Finally, they constructed plausible scenarios for the future, based on the findings from Stages 1 and 2.

The participants produced several scenarios defining possible futures for their country. These narratives were published in Tanzania's biggest newspaper in December 2014. The process organizers then toured the country's nine regions to share the findings and to help inform the coming debates on Tanzania's constitution and its 2015 national election.

In our view, both the problem and the solution involve narrative. The public's views on policy are usually grounded in a background story. Typically, these are created by advocates. A politician,

committee, or communications firm frames a narrative to support a specific interest or set of values that they want to promote. They use the story to appeal to people who share those values or interests, and to defend policies that advance them. Unsurprisingly, opponents do the same thing for other values and interests and, ultimately, this leads to conflict or a stand-off.

Thus, while environmentalists tell a compelling story about why climate change requires an immediate transition to renewable energy, those whose livelihoods depend on the oil and gas industry tell a convincing story, to support a staged transition. These stories fail to connect and, when the two sides engage in "debate," as often as not, they talk past one another.

By contrast, a shared narrative is a story that opponents create together, from the bottom up, through a deliberative process (Sidebar 3 provides an example). This requires a conscious effort to stand back and try to see the bigger picture, rather than just their respective parts of it.

The participants start by listening to each other's stories. This not only builds trust, it clarifies how the subjective aspects of their experience – their values, interests, emotions, and so on – are intertwined with the situation.

Learning about their different experiences creates shared understandings and points of contact between the competing narratives. It builds bridges. Special techniques are used to align the stories around these points of contact in ways that everyone can accept.

While this is not yet a solution to the policy issues – that comes later – it creates the common ground that participants need to begin discussing how to mitigate risks or balance competing values in ways that are more likely to be seen as respectful and fair.

The insert below is borrowed from the Findings and Conclusions section of this paper. It sets out five key points about narrative building that emerge from the discussion. Readers may find it useful to review them in advance:

Five key points about narrative building

1 **Shared narratives are built from the bottom up**
The process starts by getting the parties to tell their stories and learn about the different experiences behind them. They then go on to compare their stories, sift through them to find points of contact, and work together to create a single shared narrative that both sides find acceptable.

2 **Narrative building requires deliberation**
While the goal is to integrate different stories within a single story – synthesis – this kind of narrative building also requires lots of analysis, including careful reasoning, the weighing of evidence, reliance on expert knowledge, and more.

3 **Truth, fairness, and respect are guiding principles of narrative building**
Where disagreements arise, the participants must explore and reconfigure their respective stories in new ways. For example, people may share stories that contain facts that others regard as false or values they see as biased or offensive. The process tests questionable facts and values against available evidence and appropriate codes. It weeds out the bad ones as different people's narratives are absorbed and consolidated within the larger, shared narrative that is emerging.

4 **Deliberation is both internal and external**
If a shared narrative is to resolve difficult tensions, the individuals affected must **internalize** it. External deliberation with others is not enough. Internalization requires deliberation within one's self: individuals reflect on, assess, compare, and weigh how the new narrative fits with those they have already internalized. Adjustments to the old ones may be required. In effect, internalization is a way of taking **ownership** of the new narrative by personally committing to its key messages. Only then is the shared narrative likely to affect the person's values and behavior and contribute to a lasting resolution of the issue.

5 **A shared narrative is not a panacea**
Stories usually contain tensions and conflicts – often deep and powerful ones. While a shared narrative may reposition key tensions between participants, it is unlikely to fully resolve them. That usually requires further deliberation in later stages of the process. Typically, narrative building happens in the early stages, before the participants turn to more focused questions, such as how to mitigate risks or decide how to balance two competing values. As attention shifts onto these other tasks, the shared narrative provides critical common ground to support and guide the discussion.

The next three sections highlight three techniques to help align and integrate different stories and create a shared narrative. They are not mutually exclusive, and Section 5 will consider ways that they can be combined within a single process. We start with an example of how narrative building is done from the bottom-up.

3. Building from the bottom up: The Mental Health 2K Project

The Mental Health 2K Project (MH: 2K) is a partnership between two organizations in the United Kingdom: Involve and Leaders Unlocked. The project currently involves five urban centres across England and uses narrative building techniques to help youth 14 to 25 years of age articulate and understand their experiences with mental health issues.[2] In this section, we use the MH: 2K case to illustrate the first technique of narrative building: **building from the bottom up**. The example case provides a simple illustration of how this bottom-up approach works, which we present in three basic steps:

1. Exchange Stories
2. Identify and Consolidate Shared Stories
3. Test and Adjust the Stories

Exchange stories

The first step in building from the bottom up is to exchange stories. Each MH: 2K project starts by recruiting a core group of young "citizen researchers" from the community who are willing and able to talk about their experiences with mental health issues. This lived experience is viewed as a special form of expertise, which they bring to the process. The recruits take part in a series of working sessions where they talk about their experiences. They explain how an issue has affected them, what they did to cope, and what they have learned. The goal is to get a series of first-person accounts of what it is like to live with various mental health issues.

Identify and consolidate shared stories

The second step in building from the bottom up requires identifying common ground and consolidating the shared stories. Thus, in the MH: 2K project, the researchers use the recruits' stories about mental health to create a short-list of the issues they think should have a high priority in their community. They compare stories to see where they are similar or different and which elements make an issue seem important to them.

For example, suppose that peer pressure emerges as a common factor in stories about anxiety. The researchers will look for patterns in the environment that shed light on the issue. Is the environment at school too competitive? Do parents expect too much of their kids? Is membership in cliques or gangs a condition of social acceptance?

As the discussion progresses, a shared narrative will emerge that highlights these contextual factors. That narrative will be informed by an expert panel that provides medical knowledge, guidance, and other relevant information, as well as by the perspectives and vides of young people who describe their experiences. In this way, the narrative has both a description of facts, and value judgments, such as whether a pattern of behavior is right or wrong, appropriate, helpful, or harmful. As one expert observed, the project provides "a unique and powerful way of tapping into the unknowns, and those things that we [i.e., experts] think we know, but really don't know."[3]

Once the list of priorities is complete, the researchers co-design a series of workshops for other young people who will come to hear what the researchers have learned. The researchers receive training in public speaking and discuss how to present their findings in ways that will connect with the youth who attend the workshops.

[2] The cities where projects are located are Birmingham, Central Lancashire, North Tyneside, Nottingham and Nottinghamshire, and Oldham. For more information on the project, see: https://www.involve.org.uk/our-work/our-projects/practice/how-can-young-people-help-tackle-mental-ill-health

[3] See MH:2K Final Evaluation Report, Pages 8 – 9, at: https://www.involve.org.uk/sites/default/files/uploads/MH2K-Oldham-final-evaluation-report.pdf

Summing up, the tasks and techniques in this second stage – storytelling, prioritizing issues, and preparing for the workshops – are designed to get the recruits discussing with one another about their stories, working together to consolidate them in ways that shed light on the context around their mental health issues, and assessing how factors in the environment may be contributing to these issues.

Test and adjust stories

Once these tasks have been completed, the third step of building from the bottom up – testing and adjusting stories – can begin. In the MH: 2K project, this step takes the researchers on a "roadshow." They use a series of workshops to engage about 500 young people in a community-wide discussion of mental health issues. Participants listen to the researchers' stories and reflections on the priority issues, then draw on their own experiences to comment.

The researchers, in turn, provide answers to the questions and pose further questions: Do the stories resonate? How well do they articulate the circumstances around these issues? Do the stories need to be modified? How? Why?

Finally, the researchers take what they have learned and use it to adjust and refine their stories and the lessons before the next workshop, where they will repeat the process. Throughout, the expert panel is available to provide information and advice on the issues and/or community services.

Lessons

This case shows how a bottom-up process uses deliberative techniques to integrate and align different stories. The various steps in the process consolidate important information and insights from different stories within a shared narrative, which can then be used by decision-makers to help refine and adjust their programs and services:

- A shared narrative may identify mental health issues that are affecting their community, such as anxiety, depression, or eating disorders, and that should be recognized as a priority.
- It may say something insightful about the role the community plays in creating or sustaining these issues.
- The narrative may also provide insights into how the community could respond to these issues, as happened in the Canadian territory of Nunavut (see Sidebar 4).
- Finally, a shared narrative may serve as a wake-up call to the community to rally around a plan to act on the findings.

4. How narrative building helped suicide prevention in Nunavut

Canada's northern territory of Nunavut has a population of 38,000, of which 85 percent are Inuit. Suicide is a long-standing and deeply troubling problem that affects mainly youth. In 2004, the suicide rate among youth was 11 times the national average.

The territory has since made an impressive effort to address this problem by creating a comprehensive suicide prevention strategy. The motivating idea is that suicide is preventable. The supporting narrative identifies unhealthy social conditions as a key cause but insists that their impacts can be mitigated through a coordinated community effort.

Communities are rising to the challenge, and the strategy seems to be working. Many communities now run youth nights and cultural activities to keep teens in tiny, isolated towns busy. New programs teach traditional skills that help young people develop emotional coping skills. Youth have gathering times where they talk about their emotions. Every community now has mental-health staff. If teachers see a student struggling, they can pass that information to people who can help.

Although much remains to be done, measures like these have decreased the suicide rate every year since 2014.

Source: https://www.ctvnews.ca/canada/the-trends-are-hopeful-still-high-but-nunavut-suicide-rate-edging-down-1.3778921

Our next case, The Ottawa Hospital, looks at a second technique that can help build a shared narrative: defining a master narrative to establish common ground.

4. Defining a master narrative: The Ottawa Hospital

The Ottawa Hospital (in Canada's capital city) decided to build a new campus on the edge of downtown. The Hospital wished to do this in partnership with the community and saw public deliberation as the right approach. In the winter of 2018, it established the Campus Engagement Group (CEG), which includes 23 community stakeholders, as well as representatives from the Hospital, the City of Ottawa, and the Government of Canada.

The CEG is the project's principal deliberative body.[4] Its role is to consolidate and articulate the community's views on key issues relating to the design of the facility and grounds. Public deliberation includes basic "rules of engagement," and the CEG's members have agreed to them.[5] However, the Hospital engagement process also required that the CEG create a shared narrative to complement and support these rules. A strong narrative was supposed to help the members better understand one another's viewpoints and frame issues in ways that they could all accept.

The master narrative

The CEG published its shared narrative in December 2019, after nearly a year of meetings and discussions.[6] Its first task on this journey was to consolidate a long list of principles and organize them in a more manageable form.[7] This was a big step toward the narrative. For example, principles to promote accessibility got the members talking about how to ensure the new facility would be welcoming to persons with disabilities, while those aimed at heritage articulated key aspects of the community's history.

Nevertheless, these accounts of the different principles were more like a list than a narrative. It was often difficult to see how they were connected, or which principles should have priority when they clash. In short, there was no overarching story to connect all the pieces. There was no **master narrative**.

A master narrative unites the various "sub-narratives" around a single, overarching purpose; it sets a goal on which they all converge. But a master narrative is more than an overarching goal. It is also a story that explains why that goal matters to the participants and the project.

The master narrative for this project emerged as the CEG's members were discussing an urban design paper titled "Building Blocks for a Healthy Ottawa." The paper notes how the rise of the automobile changed cities and neighbourhoods in North America.[8]

The paper explains how neighbourhoods used to be vibrant places where **social connectedness** was a central part of people's lifestyle. The automobile changed this by changing community planning. The places where people work, shop, are entertained, and live were separated and moved to different parts of the city – "zones" – and people relied on their cars to travel between them. The long-term result has not been good: more sedentary lifestyles, less healthy eating habits, and creeping isolation in what were once bustling communities.

Current research in urban design analyzes this trend to see how different design choices – especially zoning – affect residents' behavior. It then uses the learning to try to recreate communities that promote the kind of social connectedness and healthy living of the past.

The CEG's discussion of this new model changed how its members saw the Hospital/community partnership and their respective roles in it. Until then, their main goal had been to ensure that the design of the new

[4] The community at large will also be engaged in a broader set of "community conversations." In addition, the CEG's members are expected to engage their respective networks on a regular basis and to bring their views to the CEG's discussions.

[5] These rules include, for example, a willingness to listen to one another's views, to work to find reasonable accommodation of their differences, and to defer to evidence. The rules of engagement are discussed in Volumes I and II of The Deliberation Series (see Footnote 1).

[6] The full report is available at: https://www.middlegroundengagement.com/about-public-deliberation/ideas/#Ottawa

[7] Ibid. These principles are supposed to guide decision-making and were assigned to the project by the three sponsoring governments and the Hospital. The list of principles is in Appendix B of the CEG's report.

[8] The paper is available at: https://documents.ottawa.ca/sites/documents/files/op_discuss_paper_health_en.pdf

campus would meet the Hospital's needs, while responding to community concerns. Members tended to see themselves as advocates for the interest they had been asked to represent. No one doubted that the other interests around the table were important or that they should be respectful of them, but it was hard to see what they all had in common. The general view was that each member's job was to speak up for the interest he/she represented.

The urban design paper showed the CEG members where the common ground lay. Basically, it helped them see that their real job is to recommend design choices that maximize social connectedness and healthy living – and that they need each other to make the right choices.

For example, the architects may know that building a campus between two neighbourhoods can feel like a huge wall between them. The experts may therefore agree that they want residents to see the campus grounds more as a bridge than a wall. However, the experts will not know which combination of design options – such as bike paths, walkways, gardens, or parks – is most likely to make residents feel that the grounds are a safe and welcoming passageway from one neighbourhood to the other.

Every community is different, and the planners need the CEG to help them solve issues like this. Not only do its members have expertise on important issues such as heritage or the environment, the CEG is a huge reservoir of lived experience about the community's needs, expectations, aspirations, and concerns. It can draw on this combination of expertise and experience to help the planners find design options that maximize social connectedness and healthy living.

But to achieve this, the members must work together as a team. Rather than seeing themselves as advocates for a specific interest, they must view these interests as interconnected and recognize that the best way to design, say, a campus that feels like a welcoming passageway between neighbourhoods is to collaborate with one another. This leads to a win for the community and the Hospital – a win/win.

In sum, the master narrative not only identifies social connectedness and healthy living as the right goals for the Hospital/community partnership, it tells a rich story about the rationale behind the partnership. It shows the partners how and why they need each other to design a campus that maximizes progress toward those goals.

To be clear, the CEG's narrative will not make all the tensions vanish and finding solutions will not be easy. Trade-offs must be made on a wide range of issues, from parking vs. greenspace to traffic vs. access. However, the narrative creates a context in which people with conflicting interests can also see that they share – at least in part – the same vision. Having a shared vision makes negotiation, compromise, and finding a genuine win/win much more manageable.

Our third case involves Kenya's effort to reform the country's politics and electoral system, which we use to highlight the role that the community at large can play in a bottom-up approach to narrative building.

5. Public Participation in the BBI

BBI heard from Kenyans in all 47 counties. More than 7,000 citizens from all ethnic groups, genders, cultural and religious practices, and different social and economic sectors were consulted. Specifically, the taskforce heard from more than 400 elected leaders past and present; prominent local voices from the community; and young people who added their voice to citizens in the counties; 123 individuals representing major institutions, including constitutional bodies and major stakeholders in the public and private sectors; 261 individuals and organizations who sent memoranda via (e)mail; and 755 citizens who offered handwritten submissions during public forums in the counties.

Source: https://weeklycitizen.co.ke/bbi-report-at-the-center-of-discussion/

5. Creating public ownership: Kenya's plan for a National ethos

Building Bridges to a New Kenyan Nation is a public engagement process led by a taskforce of 14 distinguished Kenyans. The taskforce conducted 18 months of hearings across the country before delivering a report to Kenya's president and the leader of the opposition on November 27, 2019.[9]

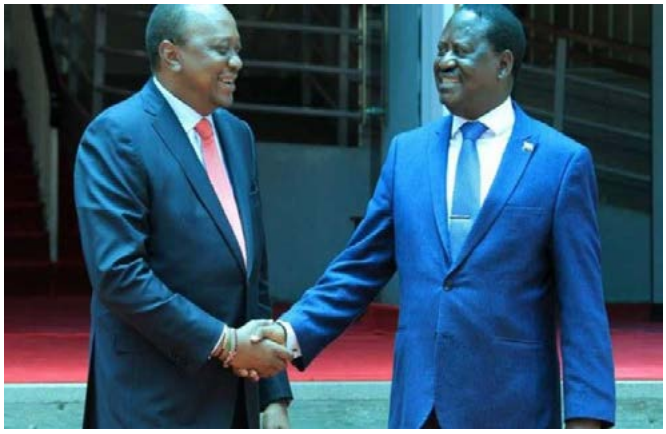
The process provides a timely example of a large-scale engagement process that raises two critical questions for public deliberation: Can the public at large participate meaningfully in a public deliberation process? Why is this important?

The Building Bridges Initiative: a National narrative on reconciliation

According to the Building Bridges Initiative's (BBI) official website, Kenya's national elections are precipitating a national crisis. Political factions have organized along ethnic and class lines and use elections to gain control of the government. As a result, elections have become deeply divisive, winner-take-all contests that often lead to violence.[10]

The issue came to a head in 2017 after President Uhuru Kenyatta was declared the winner of the national election. When the opposition leader, Raila Odinga, contested the results, it touched off a series of boycotts and intense civil unrest.

Then on March 9, 2018, Kenyatta and Odinga unexpectedly appeared on the steps of a government building, shook hands for the TV cameras, and pledged to work together to put an end to these destabilizing fits of political unrest, once and for all, through the BBI.



President Uhuru Kenyatta and Raila Odinga, launching the BBI with "The Handshake"

The initial plan was to invite some citizens and civil society organizations to participate in the hearings, distil the lessons, and produce a set of recommendations that would be turned into legal, policy, and administrative measures for implementation.[11] In short, the process was designed to be essentially top down.

The BBI report and the reaction

In its response to the crisis, the BBI report proposed several important reforms to the political system. It then went on to insist that these reforms would succeed only if it they were supported by a new "national ethos:"

> *A nation is founded on a national ethos. This can only be established by common goals and aspirations. We need to build a common vision of Kenya and formulate the goals we want to pursue as a nation.*[12]

The report touched off a nation-wide debate and, as the recommendations were discussed, a key message became increasingly clear: **political reform requires social reform**.

In calling for a new ethos, the taskforce effectively recognizes that Kenya's political problems are deeper than its political institutions. Competing narratives have become entrenched in the culture and are dividing the nation. They affect how people evaluate

[9] The report is available at: https://d2s5ggbxczybtf.cloudfront.net/bbireport.pdf

[10] https://www.bbi.go.ke/divisive-elections-1

[11] https://www.capitalfm.co.ke/news/2019/12/kenyatta-extends-bbi-term-to-formulate-implementation-roadmap/

[12] https://www.bbi.go.ke/excerpts

risks, set objectives, and define the boundaries around acceptable and unacceptable solutions.

The taskforce believes that a new ethos could overcome these divisions, but this kind of change is difficult and takes time. Moreover, it must be driven at least as much from the bottom up as the top down. Signaling their approval of the ideas is not enough. Kenyans must **take ownership** of the ideas by committing to them and acting on them. But to advance the agenda, Kenyans need a process that gets them discussing the ideas and starting to internalize them.

Unfortunately, when the country's political leaders finally launched a second phase, it fell far short of this.[13] Phase 2 was essentially a series of town hall meetings and political rallies. Neither is likely to get people listening to one another or deliberating over ideas. Typically, people use events like these to advocate for specific interests, challenge opponents, or support speakers whose views they agree with. They are as likely to divide a community as to unite it.

In April 2020, about mid-way through this second phase, the government halted the process to respond to the COVID-19 crisis. It is unclear whether the debate will resume once the pandemic is over. Nevertheless, two lessons from the BBI remain timely and important:

- First, public participation plays a critical role in large-scale social change.
- Second, a successful process should inspire the public to take some ownership of the findings – in this case, the new ethos.

While we don't know what fate awaits the BBI process, this does raise a critical issue for this study: Could the BBI have done things differently in the second round? Is there a way to engage large numbers of people that encourages the kind of ownership and commitment needed to drive social change initiatives, such as the new ethos? We think there is and, while it involves public deliberation processes, it also requires some innovative thinking around them.

[13] https://www.capitalfm.co.ke/news/2019/12/kenyatta-extends-bbi-term-to-formulate-implementation-roadmap/

6. Narrative building and public deliberation

Public deliberation typically involves a relatively small but representative group of citizens who rely on analysis, evidence, and expert advice to help them find a solution to an issue.[14] Often, this works out well. A process that is transparent, inclusive, evidence-based, and fair, can have considerable legitimacy with the public, which makes it easier for decision-makers to accept and act on the advice.

But there are limits. As the Kenyan example shows, ambitious changes often require more than public approval or consent. Most people support the idea of a transition to sustainable energy or the elimination of systemic racism, but there is no guarantee that they will change their values or behaviour just because the participants in a deliberative process have decided that they should.

Real progress on these issues must come from the bottom up. Individuals must make a personal commitment to the ideas that will drive the change – which means they must internalize them. Working together to build a shared narrative can be an important step in this direction.

As we've seen in the MH: 2K case, the process starts by getting participants to listen to one another's stories, then working together to find points of contact or common ground between the stories and, finally, combining the different stories within a single shared narrative that all sides find acceptable. This kind of exchange creates the conditions in which individuals can start taking personal ownership of the narrative.

[14] The Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development's Innovative Citizen Participation and New Democratic Institutions: Catching the Deliberative Wave , Highlights 2020, defines public deliberation as "a randomly selected group of people who are broadly representative of a community spending significant time learning and collaborating through facilitated deliberation to form collective recommendations for policy makers." Available at: http://www.oecd.org/gov/open-government/innovative-citizen-participation-new-democratic-institutions-catching-the-deliberative-wave-highlights.pdf

We think this process can be scaled up to include large numbers of people by using what in our earlier publications we called a **blended process.** What follows is a simple sketch of the model. Basically, it distinguishes between three different engagement streams and assigns different tasks to each one:

1. **Community conversations**

   In this stream, members of the public gather in local venues, such as churches, union halls, clubs, co-operatives, and community centres, and tell their stories about how the issue looks to them. These events are led by facilitators and designed to get community members listening to one another's stories, focusing on their different experiences, and searching for points of contact and shared understandings. This stream has two main goals:

   - To gather the stories from which to build a shared narrative and to uncover points of contact between them; and
   - To build openness, understanding, and trust within the community, so that people on all sides of the issue are receptive to the idea of a shared narrative.

2. **Online exchanges**

   Online exchanges use digital tools, such as social media or websites, to allow large numbers of people to exchange views on the issue and to tell their stories. This stream is also used to gather stories for the shared narrative, and to help build understanding and trust within the community. In addition, the online stream helps ensure:

   - That the conversation reaches across geographic and social boundaries of all kinds; and
   - That as many members of the public as possible can participate, no matter where they live or what hours they keep.

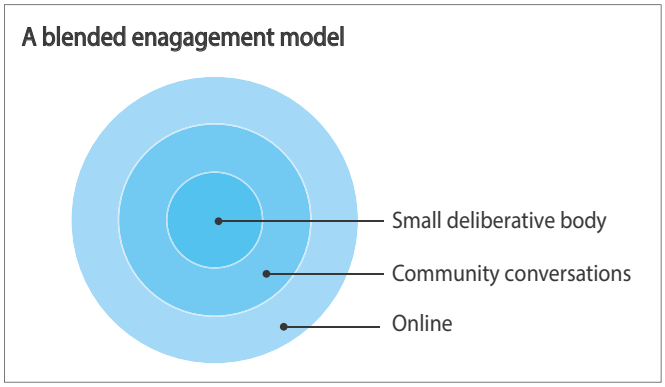
   As the insert below on Artificial Intelligence suggests, online engagement appears to be at an historic turning point that could greatly enhance this kind of narrative-building process.

3. **Deliberative analysis**

   This includes a group of community members who serve as the principal forum for deeper deliberation. Typically, this is a smaller more focused body, possibly like the CEG in the Ottawa Hospital example. This stream has two main tasks:

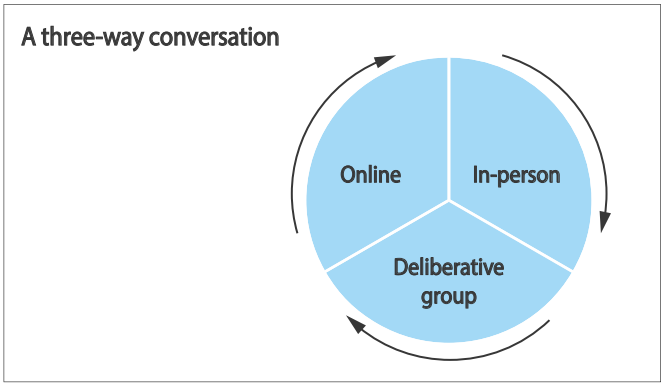
   - It assumes primary responsibility for the deeper, more analytical discussions around developing the shared narrative, including producing various iterations of it, which are made public as the process unfolds; and
   - It provides a check on the other two streams to ensure that factual claims used to support the emerging narrative are consistent with available evidence; and that the values it promotes are appropriate.

These three engagement streams can be represented as follows:



Importantly, while the different streams interact, they are not hierarchically organized. As the process unfolds, the findings from each stream are regularly shared with and reviewed by the other streams. In addition, the deliberative group will publicize drafts of the emerging shared narrative, which the other streams will comment on and incorporate into their own discussions.

The process thus creates a three-way conversation that allows the three streams to influence and shape one another's discussions, while providing considerable latitude for each one to converse as its participants see fit. Ideally, this results in broad support for the shared narrative that is being developed by the deliberative body:



This description of a blended process focuses on building a shared narrative but, once the narrative is in place, the process could move into a new phase, where it would focus on other aspects of the issue, such as mitigating risk or striking a balance between specific values or interests.

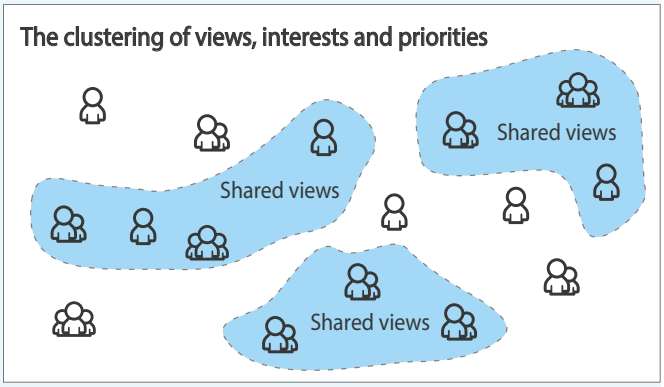
The blended model can be used to support large-scale participation at this stage by, again, distinguishing between different tasks and assigning them to different streams. Unfortunately, we must leave this discussion for another day.

Artificial Intelligence: a game-changer for online narrative building?

Artificial Intelligence (AI) appears to be opening new doors for narrative building. Large-scale, bottom-up, narrative-building processes may be about to move online, with huge consequences for public deliberation.

Today, millions of people can share their messages on social media sites, such as Twitter and Facebook. This means that, in principle, they can all participate in a single, large-scale discussion, such as a narrative-building process. The challenge, of course, is how to manage all these voices talking at once.

It can be done. When thousands of people are engaged in a dialogue, many will express similar viewpoints or sentiments, which create patterns in the data. A decade ago, the only way to identify these patterns was to read everyone's posts. For large projects, this was simply impractical, but today, Natural Language Processing (and other AI tools) allows analysts to scan vast amounts of "natural language data," such as Facebook or twitter posts, to identify these patterns quickly, accurately, and inexpensively:



This new efficiency means analysts can now:

- Identify the groups and interests at play
- Surface common points held by these groups
- Provide a voice for all participants
- Manage and facilitate the discussions

This new efficiency is a game-changer. It allows facilitators to monitor the dynamics of a large-scale exchange in real time, and then intervene strategically to help different clusters resolve tensions, arrive at compromises, or clarify views. In effect, facilitators can nudge participants in ways that help consolidate the narrative – and that makes narrative building a real possibility. The consequences of this new technology could be far-reaching, indeed.

7. Findings and conclusions

This paper maintains that narrative plays a central role in shaping public policy debates. That is hardly news. Those who engage in or report on these debates routinely comment on how narrative is guiding the public's views on an issue or how different sides employ competing narratives.

Nor is it a secret that these narratives often come from professionals. Experts in communications view narratives as part of a toolkit for aligning facts and values in ways that will persuade people to support a cause. They also know that their opponents will create alternative narratives based on competing values. We saw this in the climate change example in Section 2.

Public debate tends to take these competing narratives at face value. They are said to reflect different "sides of the story" and the public is expected to choose a side. The idea that everyone should pause, stand back, and try to get the "whole story" is barely broached, presumably because it is at odds with the partisan culture.

The Open Government movement represents a break with this thinking. It promotes ideas such as co-design and citizen participation as stepping-stones to better decision-making and public policy. The motivating idea is that bringing people with different perspectives together is a better way to solve issues than forcing them to choose sides.

Public deliberation occupies an increasingly important place in this movement. It provides a methodology for working through difficult issues and finding ways to accommodate differences – for finding a win/win.

We've used this paper to show how and why we think narrative building can make a major contribution to this work. Basically, our idea is that the different sides to a story – the competing narratives – often can be brought together in a shared narrative that creates common ground and can help the participants resolve their conflicts. In closing, we can summarize our findings on narrative building in five key points (which were also included in Section 2):

- **Shared narratives are built from the bottom up**
  The process starts by getting the parties to tell their stories and learn about the different experiences behind them. They then go on to compare their stories, sift through them to find points of contact, and work together to create a single shared narrative that both sides find acceptable.
- **Narrative building requires deliberation**
  While the goal is to integrate different stories within a single story – synthesis – this kind of narrative building also requires lots of analysis, including careful reasoning, the weighing of evidence, reliance on expert knowledge, and more.
- **Truth, fairness, and respect are guiding principles of narrative building**
  Where disagreements arise, the participants must explore and reconfigure their respective stories in new ways. For example, people may share stories that contain facts that others regard as false or values they see as biased or offensive. The process tests questionable facts and values against available evidence and appropriate codes. It weeds out the bad ones as different people's narratives are absorbed and consolidated within the larger, shared narrative that is emerging.
- **Deliberation is both internal and external**
  If a shared narrative is to resolve difficult tensions, the individuals affected must internalize it. External deliberation with others is not enough. Internalization requires deliberation within one's self: individuals reflect on, assess, compare, and weigh how the new narrative fits with those they have already internalized. Adjustments to the old ones may be required. In effect, internalization is a way of taking ownership of the new narrative by personally committing to its key messages. Only then is the shared narrative likely to affect the person's values and behavior and contribute to a lasting resolution of the issue.
- **A shared narrative is not a panacea**
  Stories usually contain tensions and conflicts – often deep and powerful ones. While a shared narrative may reposition key tensions between participants, it is unlikely to fully resolve them. That usually requires further deliberation in later stages of the process. Typically, narrative building happens in the early stages, before the participants turn to more focused questions, such as how to mitigate risks or decide how to balance two competing values. As attention shifts onto these other tasks, the shared narrative provides critical common ground to support and guide the discussion.

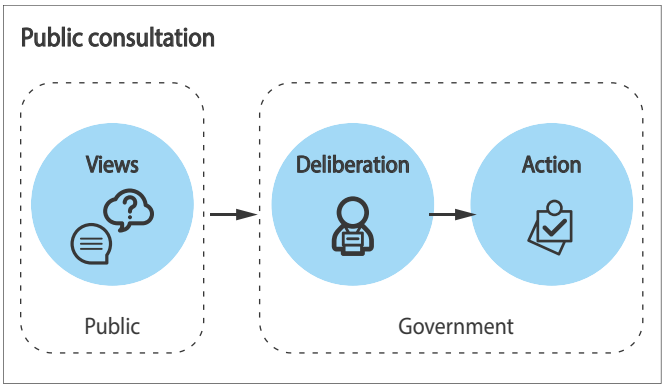
Appendix: How we define "public deliberation"

This is Volume IV in The Deliberation Series, which was launched in 2019 by The OGP Practice Group on Dialogue and Deliberation to document the Group's evolving approach to public deliberation.[15]

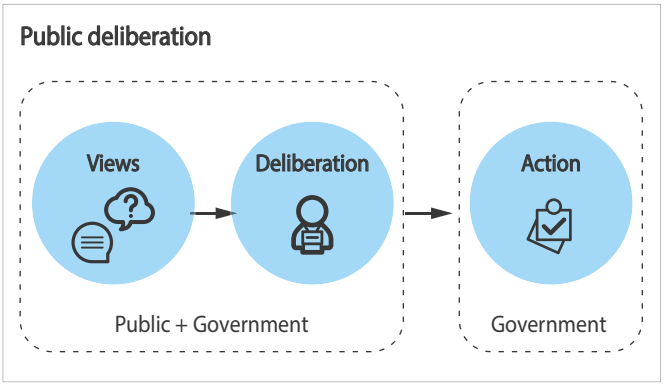
The phrase "public deliberation" can be an obstacle to interpretation, as it is used in different and valid ways by different people, so a few words are in order about how we're using it here. Basically, we continue to define it as we did in our first three publications, where "public deliberation" was contrasted with "public consultation."

When undertaking a public consultation process, the government invites the public (or a specific set of stakeholders) to provide their views on an issue. The process can take different forms, such as a town hall meeting, a call for submissions, or an online survey. Once the views have been collected, the government deliberates over what it has heard – it analyzes and weighs these views – and then uses the findings to decide on a solution.

Importantly, this deliberative stage is usually carried out by officials behind closed doors. The resulting conclusions are often presented in a report or public announcement, though sometimes the result is not made public at all. Finally, the conclusions or findings may be implemented or "actioned." The diagram below illustrates these three basic stages in the consultation process:



Public deliberation is a different way of engaging the public. Rather than allowing the deliberative part of the process to be handled by public officials behind closed doors, public deliberation opens those doors and gives the participants a meaningful role in weighing trade-offs, discussing priorities, and forming solutions. In doing so, they engage in far deeper and more meaningful ways than a consultative process would allow.



Ideally, giving the participants a meaningful role in the deliberation stage leads to shared solutions – something we call a "win/win." But there are rules. To succeed, participants must engage in a spirit of openness and learning: they must listen to one another, learn about each other's concerns, discuss their similarities and differences, weigh evidence, and work together to strike a balance between competing values and interests. Decisions that are made this way tend to have a high degree of legitimacy and the process builds public trust in the government.

[15] The Series is available at: https://www.opengovpartnership.org/documents/deliberation-getting-policy-making-out-from-behind-closed-doors/