

PARTICIPATORY METHODS TOOLKIT  
A practitioner's manual

21st Century Town Meeting®

## Colophon

Participatory Methods Toolkit. A practitioner's manual  
Method: 21st Century Town Meeting®

This is an extract of the publication 'Participatory Methods Toolkit. A practitioner's manual', a joint publication of the King Baudouin Foundation and the Flemish Institute for Science and Technology Assessment (viWTA).

The full version of the manual includes:

- Introduction about participatory methods
- General guidelines and tips for participatory methods
- Complete description of 13 participatory methods: 21st Century Town Meeting® ; Charrette ; Citizens Jury ; Consensus Conference ; Deliberative Polling® ; Delphi ; Expert Panel ; Focus Group ; Participatory Assessment, Monitoring and Evaluation ; Planning Cell ; Scenario Building Exercise ; Technology Festival ; The World Café
- Brief descriptions of 50 methods and techniques

All publications are available free of charge, online via [www.kbs-frb.be](http://www.kbs-frb.be) or [www.viWTA.be](http://www.viWTA.be).

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# 21ST CENTURY TOWN MEETING®<sup>1</sup>

## **I. DEFINITION**

A 21st Century Town Meeting is a forum that links technology with small-group, face-to-face dialogue to engage thousands of people at a time (up to 5,000 per meeting) in deliberation about complex public policy issues. Through a combination of keypad polling, groupware computers, large screen projection, teleconferencing and other technologies, 21st Century Town Meetings enable participants to simultaneously participate in intimate discussions and contribute to the collective wisdom of a very large group. A 21st Century Town Meeting is more than a single event: it is an integrated process of citizen, stakeholder and decision-maker engagement that produces recommendations on public policy in time frames that align with governance cycles and the demands of the media.

## **II. WHEN TO USE**

Large-scale public deliberations can impact the terms and outcome of a debate, the shape and content of proposed or enacted policy, or how dollars are allocated in a budget. Whatever the subject matter, people will be more likely to engage in a deliberative process if they believe they are helping to make decisions that will have an impact in the real world in reasonable time frames. A 21st Century Town Meeting should therefore be used when there is a direct link to the key decision-makers who can ensure results.

There are three categories of public work (whether local, regional or national in scope) that are particularly well-suited to the 21st Century Town Meeting methodology: planning and economic development, budgeting and resource allocation, and policy formulation.

### **1. PLANNING AND ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT.**

City, state and regional planning efforts are complex enterprises involving weighing and prioritizing a range of substantive issues (from economic development to the environment, housing to education), while balancing trade-offs between short-term and long-term investments. The 21st Century Town Meeting can take a large group of people through such a planning maze. The model's use of carefully developed participant guides and dialogue questions combine with the instant voting technology and theming capacity to enable participants to rank order choices against a set of agreed-upon criteria and values.

<sup>1</sup> "21st Century Town Meeting" is trademarked by AmericaSpeaks, a nonprofit organization based in the United States. For purposes of readability, the trademark symbol will not be used throughout this chapter.



## 2. BUDGETING AND RESOURCE ALLOCATION.

A 21st Century Town Meeting can be particularly useful when public officials must establish budgetary priorities and make tough choices. Public budgets have an enormous impact on the quality of people's daily lives. Because needs often outpace available resources there are always winners and losers in budget decision-making. The 21st Century Town Meeting levels the playing field: no organized group can take over the deliberations; everyone who comes participates in the same agenda; and all voices are equal. Applying this public and transparent process to budget decision-making increases the likelihood that resource allocation will reflect the common good rather than the priorities of the most vocal special interests.

## 3. POLICY FORMULATION.

The 21st Century Town Meeting is particularly appropriate when critical public policy decisions are pending — when the political landscape is "up for grabs," a cross-section of the public has a deep stake in the issue, and/or when polling data indicate that people believe they can reach consensus even if partisan positioning means the politicians cannot. The model is ideal for working through contentious terrain because it equalizes the voices of all participants and follows a design that intentionally builds consensus by using values-based questions to arrive at concrete policy recommendations.

In any of these three contexts, a 21st Century Town Meeting can be especially useful when there is a need for decision-making across a large geographic area. Satellite video teleconferencing technology combined with the established meeting methodology can allow for simultaneous, multi-site information-sharing and deliberation.

## III. PROCEDURE

### A. Overview

As noted above, a 21st Century Town Meeting is an integrated process of citizen, stakeholder and decision-maker engagement over the course of many months, both preceding and following a large-scale event. At the center of the process is the day-long Town Meeting event, but the critical preparatory work includes:

- Ensuring that decision-makers are prepared to partner with the public;
- Involving stakeholders in the planning process;
- Creating a politically neutral, highly substantive and accessible discussion guide;
- Building a well-balanced agenda; and
- Identifying the follow-up action path.

The 21st Century Town Meeting itself proceeds through four stages:

- Setting the context
- Clarifying values
- Developing recommendations
- Reporting out

In the end, voice has been given to the collective wisdom of a large, demographically representative cross-section of the public. Participants leave a 21st Century Town Meeting with a record of their work and a real stake in its implementation. Because decision-makers have participated in the event and agreed to act on the recommendations, the work of a 21st Century Town Meeting can have a lasting impact.

**TIP:** Because the 21st Century Town Meeting focuses on discussion and deliberation among citizens, there are no speeches, question-and-answer sessions or panel presentations.

## **B. Pre-event preparation**

The 21st Century Town Meeting process has a number of key components, some discrete and others ongoing through the life of the project:

- **Assessing the Issue Landscape.** The subject for a 21st Century Town Meeting must be carefully selected and developed. Among the questions to be asked are: Who are the key decision makers, stakeholders, and communities, and what is the nature of their stake in the issue? What are the decision-making processes already underway? How would a deliberation build on previous activity? What information is required for the decision-making process? What is the history and current political climate concerning the issue? Issue development is an on-going process, so questions like these will likely need to be continually re-asked and re-answered as the project moves forward.
- **Engaging Stakeholders and Building Coalitions.** 21st Century Town Meetings have an impact because they have direct and transparent links to decision-makers on all sides of an issue, and to decision-making processes. The model cannot be successfully used without the participation and engagement of a large cohort of visible, high-profile allies and champions and cannot, therefore, be adapted to "focus group" workshops or used as an alternative to opinion polling. A sophisticated and on-going strategy for stakeholder analysis results in their engagement in both the immediate process and in long-term activities. Those whose interests may be threatened by public consultation must be brought into the process early-on and there must be fallback strategies to deal with resistance.

**TIP:** The *process* of developing a 21st Century Town Meeting can significantly increase a community's general capacity for citizen engagement work.

- **Establishing an Executive Team.** An Executive Team must guide, and be accountable for, the 21st Century Town Meeting process. This team will determine strategy, develop budgets, hire outside consultants for a range of tasks (recruitment, communications and public relations, event management, registration) and manage the project leaders and staff.
- **Ensuring Diverse Participation.** 21st Century Town Meeting participants must reflect the rich diversity of the communities that will be affected by the issue under discussion. Diverse participation gives decision-makers confidence that the meeting outcomes reflect the whole community's needs and views. Although participants are ultimately self-selecting, extensive outreach efforts will be needed to draw people from all walks of life, particularly those who feel disenfranchised and do not normally participate in civic activities. Outreach teams (generally comprised of full- and part-time field organizers who live in and/or work in target communities) secure a commitment from local organizations and leaders to both support the event and assist in recruiting. As the participant rolls grow, outreach workers identify which demographic and geographic populations are under-represented and then target media and street-based recruitment efforts accordingly.
- **Developing the Materials.** The 21st Century Town Meeting's ability to take large numbers of citizens through complex, multi-faceted issue deliberations derives from the model's emphasis on using meticulously crafted informational material that is politically neutral, highly substantive and accessible. In addition to being fair to all points of view, educational materials used in a 21st Century Town Meeting must offer sufficient context and history while leaving room for people to create new options.
- **Bringing in the Media.** Media coverage of a 21st Century Town Meeting is critical to securing participation as well as to establishing legitimacy in the public eye and among decision-makers. Early media outreach efforts generally focus on engaging neighborhood newspapers and local radio stations and, as momentum builds, the major media should begin to take an interest.
- **Building the Staff Structure.** Managing a 21st Century Town Meeting requires a considerable number of staff and volunteers. The size of the crew is, of course, dependent on the size of the event: for a meeting of 4,000 people, approximately 40-50 staff and 500 volunteers would be needed; a meeting of 200 people would require approximately 8-10 staff members and 40-45 volunteers. Volunteers are trained to work in any of three roles fundamental to the success of the event:

1) *Table facilitators.* The key tenets of a 21st Century Town Meeting (creating a safe space for real dialogue, equalizing participants, ensuring responsiveness to all viewpoints) cannot be upheld without productive table deliberation, and skilled facilitation is critical to productive deliberation. Table facilitators must have a strong background in small-group facilitation as well as the experience and confidence to work an intensive, day-long program.

2) *"Theme Team" members.* One of the most unique components of the 21st Century Town Meeting is the repeated "theming" of participant work -- reading ideas generated at the tables (sent in real time through a wireless network), distilling them into key themes or messages and presenting them back to the room to validate what has been discussed and allow for further refinements. The work of the Theme Team allows the discussion to be immediately responsive to participant views and input, and enables consensus recommendations for action to go directly to decision-makers.

3) *Issue Experts.* Issue experts circulate through the room and answer questions to help ensure that table discussions can be high-level and not founder on a lack of technical, issue-specific information.

In addition to these staff, volunteers will take on any number of key tasks, including: calling registrants to remind them of the meeting time and providing last minute details; stuffing participant folders with guides, worksheets and other background materials and dropping additional printed materials on the tables (in a 4,000 person event there will be as many as 400 tables!); registering participants on-site; serving as greeters and escorts; managing meal distribution; delivering missing printed materials to individual tables; helping people with special needs; supporting facilitation at the tables by answering questions and finding on-site experts when needed for consultation; handling software, hardware, or computer operation questions, etc.

### **C. Town Hall event**

*Setting the Context.* A 21st Century Town Meeting begins with a welcome from sponsors, and brief opening comments from key political leaders to set the context for the deliberations. Participants begin by answering demographic questions using keypad polling, both to become oriented to the technology and so they can see who's in the room, by age, gender, race, income, geography and other criteria relevant to the issue being discussed.

*Clarifying Values.* Before any deliberation on the key content there is a "values discussion" to help participants define what is important to them regarding the issues at hand. A 21st Century Town Meeting requires that participants prioritize their ideas and concerns, and the model holds that it is difficult to do this if people haven't clarified their underlying values. The values discussion lays the foundation for the next 4-5 hours of deliberation.

*Developing Recommendations.* During a 21st Century Town Meeting, participants engage in small, diverse table discussions that are facilitated by trained professionals. The size of the group (10-12 participants per table) creates a safe space for participants to learn from one another, react to ideas, use provided materials to inform their opinions and ultimately arrive at a collective view that represents the best integration of each individual's perspective. The table facilitators ensure that everyone has a chance to participate and that the process is democratic.



Networked laptop computers operated by volunteer note-takers at each table serve as electronic flipcharts to record the ideas generated during the discussions. The data collected through the computers are sent to the Theme Team where the shared priorities and recommendations are identified and then quickly presented back to the whole assembly for clarification, modification and, finally, for voting. The "back and forth" between the small- and large-scale dialogues occurs as many times as needed to develop recommendations.

Participants vote through a wireless voting keypad received at the beginning of the forum. Keypads are used for a variety of polling activities during the forum, for example: identifying participants' preferences among recommendations, making decisions about which topics to discuss further, gathering demographic information, and evaluating the meeting.

The laptop computers and voting keypads work together to yield volumes of demographically-sortable data that can be of great value to decision-makers as well as to the media as they develop the story. Keypad voting also creates transparency during the meeting and enables participants to see that their voices are being heard.

A lead facilitator directs the program from the stage where large video screens project data, themes and information in real time to the entire gathering. When themes (and their corresponding levels of support) are projected on the large screens, thousands of people get instant feedback on how the results of their table discussions fit with those of the entire forum. Use of the large screens enables individuals to see the will of the whole as it gradually develops over the course of the day.

*Reporting out.* The last 30 minutes are used to evaluate the day, review next steps, and allow time for decision-makers to comment on what they have heard from participants. By the end of the meeting, the Theme Team drafts a preliminary report of findings: a detailing of the keypad voting results and emergent themes. Every participant, decision-maker, and journalist receives the report as they leave the meeting.

## **IV. RESOURCE CONSIDERATIONS**

### **A. Workplan**

A large-scale 21st Century Town Meeting is labor intensive and costly. As a result, the availability of infrastructure and resources will always be important considerations in deciding whether or not to use it. In all, a 21st Century Town Meeting project may take six to twelve months to organize and implement. Much of the early time will be spent on issue development, engaging stakeholders and building coalitions. In most cases, execution of the event itself proceeds on this week-by-week timeline:

<p><b>15 weeks from event:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Decide on the meeting date and size</li> <li>■ Secure meeting site</li> <li>■ Complete preliminary budget</li> <li>■ Form an Executive Team</li> <li>■ Identify stakeholders</li> <li>■ Identify funding sources and co-sponsors</li> </ul>	<p><b>10 weeks from event:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Develop plans for website</li> <li>■ Develop plans for registration</li> <li>■ Finalize key media strategies</li> <li>■ Complete first program design</li> <li>■ Finalize staging, AV, event management</li> <li>■ Draft outreach materials</li> <li>■ Begin recruiting theme team and issue experts</li> </ul>
<p><b>14 weeks from event:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Preliminary discussion on content/design</li> <li>■ Continue to identify stakeholders</li> <li>■ Identify contractors to serve as local staff</li> <li>■ Develop "Behind the Scenes" event for invited guests interested in the process</li> </ul>	<p><b>9 weeks from event:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Finalize work area strategies and work plans</li> <li>■ Finalize outreach materials</li> <li>■ Launch facilitator recruitment; set training dates</li> <li>■ Review 1st draft of Participant Guide</li> <li>■ Launch Outreach</li> </ul>
<p><b>13 weeks from event:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Determine outreach goals</li> <li>■ Finalize staffing assignments</li> <li>■ Determine requirements for content</li> <li>■ Develop plan and schedule for Executive Team</li> <li>■ Prepare matrix of data sources for content</li> </ul>	<p><b>8 weeks from event:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Launch website</li> <li>■ Launch registration (online &amp; phone)</li> <li>■ Launch outreach</li> <li>■ Finalize plan for special services (e.g., childcare)</li> <li>■ Interview remaining consultants/vendors</li> </ul>
<p><b>12 weeks from event:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Follow-up phone calls to local partners</li> <li>■ Develop website design</li> <li>■ Set content committee review dates</li> <li>■ Convene program design committee</li> <li>■ Convene media team strategy meeting</li> <li>■ Develop outreach goals and strategy</li> </ul>	<p><b>7 weeks from event:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Review first program design</li> <li>■ Begin meeting with decision-makers/VIPs</li> <li>■ Finalize Participant Guide</li> <li>■ Negotiate contracts; hire consultants/vendors</li> <li>■ Executive Team meets on Participant Guide/program design</li> </ul>
<p><b>11 weeks from event:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Train local staff and develop project timeline</li> <li>■ Develop outline for Participant Guide</li> <li>■ Begin outreach to decision-makers, VIPs</li> <li>■ Conduct local site visit &amp; convene partners</li> <li>■ Interview &amp; hire local field organizers</li> </ul>	<p><b>6 weeks from event:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Develop plan for translation services</li> <li>■ Develop participant guide graphic design</li> <li>■ Review second program design</li> <li>■ Conduct focus group for Participant Guide</li> </ul>

<p><b>5 weeks from event:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Prepare media launch elements</li> <li>■ Develop follow-up plan for first 2-4 weeks</li> <li>■ Finalize participant guide; send to printer</li> <li>■ Convene Executive Team re: outreach/program design</li> <li>■ Recruit volunteer staff for Town Meeting</li> </ul>	<p><b>2 weeks from event:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Launch media registration</li> <li>■ Finalize follow-up plan</li> <li>■ Confirm participation of VIP and elected officials</li> <li>■ Final outreach and media blitz</li> <li>■ Complete detailed program design</li> <li>■ Begin final program scripting</li> <li>■ Finalize training and orientation materials</li> <li>■ Place final food order</li> </ul>
<p><b>4 weeks from event:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Finalize technical, A/V firm needs, floor plan</li> <li>■ Develop final 'look and feel' of meeting site;</li> <li>■ Finalize caterer and catering requirements</li> <li>■ Finalize speakers</li> <li>■ Develop plan for special needs services</li> <li>■ Schedule training for volunteers and staff</li> </ul>	<p><b>Final week prior to event:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Place reminder calls to registrants</li> <li>■ Finalize program script</li> <li>■ Finalize meeting staffing plan</li> <li>■ Facilitator, staff and volunteer trainings/briefings</li> <li>■ Schedule audio-visual and technology set-up</li> <li>■ Conduct program rehearsals</li> <li>■ Prepare participant materials &amp; folders</li> <li>■ Finalize plans for data analysis &amp; final report writing</li> </ul>
<p><b>3 weeks from event:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Launch media plan</li> <li>■ Conduct intensive outreach</li> <li>■ Launch outreach</li> <li>■ Finalize and produce materials for translation</li> <li>■ Produce &amp; distribute Participant Guide to participants</li> </ul>	<p><b>Follow Up:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Meetings w/ organizations, leaders, VIPs, Executive Team</li> <li>■ Conduct follow-up press work</li> <li>■ Conduct data analysis</li> <li>■ Update database</li> <li>■ Publish final report and post on the web</li> </ul>

## **B. Budget**

The main budgetary items for a 21st Century Town Meeting include:

- **Project Management:** design, planning, facilitation, production, follow-up, administrative costs.
- **Technology and Audio-Visual:** laptop computers, polling keypads, software, large screens, sound system, teleconferencing devices.
- **Outreach and Communications:** planning, staffing, materials.
- **Event, Site and Production Expenses:** planning, logistics, rentals, food, security, materials.
- **Meeting Services:** translation, sign-language, registration, transportation, child care.

**TIP:** While the cost of putting on a 21st Century Town Meeting is substantial, it is likely comparable to (if not even less than) what is routinely spent on public opinion polls and public relations strategies. In addition, authentic engagement of the public on controversial issues can mitigate the likelihood of expensive controversies and delays later.

## V. ADDITIONAL BEST PRACTICES AND POTENTIAL PITFALLS

A 21st Century Town Meeting enables thousands of people to come together and develop an action-ready slate of recommendations about complicated public issues. While no two Meetings will ever be the same – variables such as the issue under discussion, the size of the meeting, who attends, and the policy landscape will shape the end result – there are a set of core elements that must be present to ensure success:

- **The issue selected must be sufficiently "ripe."** To make the effort and expense worthwhile, the deliberations must be able to have an impact on real and current policy and/or resource decisions.
- **Credibility with citizens and decision-makers must be maintained.** Partisanship and bias must be absent from the planning and execution of events, the participant mix and the discussion materials. The decision-making process must be open and transparent.

**TIP:** Decision makers are not just "window dressing" at a 21st Century Town Meeting. They are actively engaged by participating in table discussions, observing the process and responding to citizen input at the end of the day.

- **There must be diverse participation.** No matter the size of the "community," no group can be left out and every voice must be heard, especially the most marginalized. A sufficiently diverse segment of the affected public must participate in order to have credibility with policy-makers as well as the media.
- **A safe public space must be created.** Events must be designed so they consistently seek fair and productive dialogue and create a level playing field on which individual citizen voices are equal to those representing established interests.
- **Informed dialogue must be supported.** In order to disprove the perception that citizens hold uninformed views, high-quality deliberation must be supported by strong facilitation, educational material that is neutral and fair to all perspectives, and the availability of experts to clarify issues and answer questions.
- **Public consensus must be demonstrated.** To be actionable, the process must produce information that clearly highlights the public's shared priorities.

The 21st Century Town Meeting has proven itself to be a successful model for high-impact deliberation. One town meeting, however, does not make a robust public participation process. Ultimately, the success of the effort will depend upon the degree to which it is able to: 1) develop a sustainable public constituency for action; 2) develop multi-sector institutional commitments to carry out the agenda; and 3) develop civic capacity so there is an on-going ability to support future deliberative processes.

To sustain impact and involvement after the event, the overall strategy must incorporate ways to seed and track both on-going action among participants and systemic change among decision-makers. Among the ways participants could remain involved after a large scale event are: receiving updates on the progress of the issue; contacting their elected representatives or starting a petition; participating in online and in-person discussions aimed at "going deeper;" downloading materials to organize self-facilitated meetings; recruiting others to get involved. With sustained public involvement, decision-makers come to understand that the product of a 21st Century Town Meeting is not just another report, but rather a living statement about what matters to their constituents, and a listing of those things for which they will be held accountable.

### **References and Resources**

Links to a range of published resource and reference material on the 21st Century Town Meeting®, large-scale citizen engagement work in general and more than 15 organizations working in this field can be found on [www.americaspeaks.org](http://www.americaspeaks.org).

