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COLLABORATIVE POLICY DEVELOPMENT

From Think Tank to Civic Enterprise

JUNE 2016

About the Author



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About New America

New America is committed to renewing American politics, prosperity, and purpose in the Digital Age. We generate big ideas, bridge the gap between technology and policy, and curate broad public conversation. We combine the best of a policy research institute, technology laboratory, public forum, media platform, and a venture capital fund for ideas. We are a distinctive community of thinkers, writers, researchers, technologists, and community activists who believe deeply in the possibility of American renewal.

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About snv

The stiftung neue verantwortung (snv) is a Berlin-based, non-profit think tank that brings together expertise from politics, research institutions, NGOs and businesses in order to foster the development, discourse, and publication of non-partisan policy proposals to address current political debates. The policy research at snv focuses on the intersection of technology and social change. The snv produces analysis, publishes policy recommendations, and builds inter-sectoral coalitions. It is a pioneer in a new method of collaborative policy development.

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INTRODUCTION

Think tanks in the twenty-first century should be incubators of civic entrepreneurship. This is not jargon or theory. It is a call for a concrete method of collaborative policy development described by the term “civic enterprise.” Civic enterprise seeks to help government work better by organizing information and people to solve for the skill, knowledge, and relationship gaps of public institutions. It is not a new kind of organization. It is a method for collaboration in governance that applies the logic of entrepreneurial commercial development to the public service policy arena. How? Civic enterprise develops policy products quickly, tests these ideas with diverse experts and stakeholders, and then iterates them rapidly (including active implementation in the field) until achieving a breakthrough or a failure. In the idea testing process, civic enterprise also aspires to address one central source of the decline in democratic society: the growing distance between the government and the governed.

An extended episode of experimentation in the policy arena is overdue. The first public policy organizations that would come to be called “think tanks” were founded a century ago. Their central business models haven’t changed that much: Assemble smart people in capital cities to analyze public policy debates and offer government new ideas and technocratic expertise to solve problems. This model sometimes yields extraordinary results. But it isn’t enough. It is too often insular in its communications—relying

primarily on an endless series of panel discussions and white papers presented to policy elites. And it is increasingly infected by the same maladies that plague government—too slow, too partisan, and too disconnected from the people it intends to serve.

Today, public policy think tanks should explore ways to do more than deliver knowledge to government. We must start thinking about policy research as a nonprofit product that makes governance better by leveraging topical expertise, strategic communications, and—above all—deliberative methods. These new methods are the key; they incorporate a diversity of thinking and engage the communities that will benefit from (or suffer under) policy change. Yes, the think tank business starts with policy research (or some other related form of content production). But this knowledge product must be combined with collaborative testing of ideas, technical analysis, diverse networks of experts and stakeholders, public service journalism, and community-based pilot projects. This package represents the tradecraft of a new kind of policy practitioner—let’s call this person a “civic entrepreneur.” A successful civic entrepreneur can deploy different constellations of these assets over time—tracking the arc of the political process from proposal to implementation and intervening persistently to steer the outcome. Results-oriented, fast-paced, and interactive, this kind of policy work will be in increasingly high demand as the fractures in democratic governance widen.

POLICY MARKET FAILURE

For many people, government is something that happens to citizens and not because of them. The gap between people and policymaking yields skepticism and alienation that pushes people further away from civic participation. Meanwhile, in an increasingly complex and fast-moving world, government will underperform without strong support from private and civic sector institutions to help develop and implement solutions. It's a negative feedback loop—successful policy implementation needs tight connection between public and government. And yet when government fails, it drives people away from policymaking, making it even less likely to succeed the next time around. This is the policy market failure.

That's where civic enterprise come into play. The distance between policymakers and the public is growing, and civic enterprise seeks to bridge that gap. The theory of change here is not a critique or circumvention of public government. It is a reinvestment in it. It assumes natural limitations

in the efficacy of public institutions, all of which operate in the real world of politics and the constraints of budget, technical competence, and time. Government owns the responsibility for resolving public problems, but its solutions must be informed and embraced by the communities that will live with the outcomes. It follows from this logic that we need policy and civic entrepreneurs that can help government involve more and different kinds of thinkers and community leaders in the policymaking process. Building a collaborative ecosystem of stakeholders who engage regularly with government has the added benefit of helping government keep pace with social problems. Civic enterprise anticipates the next challenge and begins testing new ideas in advance of government review so that solutions are ready faster. Plus, maintaining a standing network of actors from across sectors obviates the time-consuming work needed to reconstitute it repeatedly and reestablish relationships. The benefits are rooted in the core concept of persistent collaboration.

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THE COLLABORATIVE METHOD

Civic enterprise is a method of collaborative policy development which blends different ingredients that have long institutional histories. It is a simple recipe that starts with strong substantive analysis and empirically grounded proposals. Next into the mix come political and practical feasibility assessments. And finally, there is rigorous testing of ideas among a network of experts and stakeholders through a collaborative development of the final policy product. This process not only yields better ideas faster, it achieves buy-in from a critical mass of key stakeholders through a process of co-creation. That is not to say we should avoid controversy with lowest common denominators or insist on a mythical consensus. It means we must pursue solutions that have a good chance of working in the practical/political status quo by testing them thoroughly in advance.

The method has five sequential steps in its abstract form. In practice, the full sequence may be applied in different combinations, repeated, or cut short to suit the character of the problem or the strengths of the institution developing the policy proposal. The first three steps form the core of the process. They are easy to implement but very hard to perfect.

1. Research Sprint

The method begins by inverting the process of traditional, long-form policy research. Rather than dedicating months for an expert to produce

a monographic analysis of a policy proposal, the objective here is to develop several high quality policy proposals as quickly as possible. Neither the political process nor the demands of communities in need will tolerate long wait times for results. A trained subject-matter expert should be able to develop a problem analysis and a short set of hypotheses for solutions in a matter of weeks. The data collection employs both literature review and interviews—optimizing for a diversity of perspectives. The research sprint also applies an initial feasibility test to the hypotheses, evaluating their technical precision, political appeal, and practical viability for the institutions tasked with implementation. This phase ends with a document that crisply defines the problem and presents a small number of proposals for change. This is the “minimum viable product” to bring to the policy marketplace.

2. Stress Testing

The next phase of the method is designed to test each hypothesis through rigorous examination and deliberative debate. Concretely, that means carefully curated workshops with thought leaders from business, civil society, community leaders, academia, and government who are asked to dismantle, support, or modify the hypotheses as they see fit. The selection of participants and the rigor of session design and leadership are critical factors. The workshop agenda is presented as a

collaborative exercise, and it is explicitly built around testing the soundness of the problem analysis and proposals to address it. It is a collaborative process that is open to any outcome, including abandoning the original ideas. This phase of testing can also be done based solely on the problem analysis (without a hypothesis) using modified applications of scenario planning, foresight, and grounded theory. The result is a lively debate and conclusions that are the product of multiple minds and viewpoints. The first round of stress testing ends with a document that revises the minimum viable product to enhance its features based on the “user-tested” results from the workshops. The result is not only a stronger policy recommendation, but a loose coalition of stakeholders whose collaboration in the process begins to bind them to the result.

3. Iteration

The testing and revision process can be repeated many times. This is analogous to the constant iteration, A/B testing, and version updates that software products undergo in the commercial market in response to user data. Persistent adaptation reduces error and guards against group-think and path-dependency so common in public institutions. Often the composition of the working groups changes to approach the deliberation from different vantage points. This includes the involvement of government decision makers (typically working level) who are the ultimate targets of the work. This stage also includes probing efforts to render technical analyses or sectoral jargon in common sense formulations that resonate without over-simplification. The iterative phase typically includes frequent short publications (or broadcasts or data viz, for example) of different kinds intended to socialize the proposals with different stakeholder groups. Any ideas or formulations that ultimately cannot draw at least simple majority support in these stakeholder workshops are probably doomed in the real world of political debate. We encourage our stakeholder participants—co-creators in the collaborative policy

development—to take the proposals back to their own institutions for review, discussion, and further iteration. There is no need to brand or own the content—the dissemination of the ideas is the only metric that matters.

4. Narrative & Transfer

The next phase of the process is the transfer of the ideas from the collaborative workshops into the public discussion and to specific decision makers. The transfer work includes the publication of short policy analyses and op-eds in order to test the ideas with a broader audience. A dedicated communications strategy is now applied to “translate” technocratic-speak into a distilled analysis for non-experts and political narratives for popular (and civic) media that optimize for why this matters in the lives of real people. This storytelling portfolio then forms the basis of advocacy work—public events to showcase the work, multimedia distribution, and targeted meetings or training workshops with policymakers and staff. These are (ideally) not conducted by a single organization or with a particular partisan or ideological approach. Rather, this work leverages the buy-in of the multi-stakeholder network that has participated in the co-creation process and now holds a stake in the outcome. The central purpose of the transfer phase is to demonstrate both the quality of the thinking and the scope of the constituent support.

5. Pilot Implementation

The last phase moves beyond discussion to targeted action. Ideas that have stood the test of this collaborative policy development process have a higher probability of successful implementation. But this model need not end by handing proposals to policymakers and hoping for the best. On the contrary, the organizations involved from the beginning stick to the process and serve as either partners or topical advisers to the public institutions and local partners that seek to implement the new policies. Implementation could be undertaken

by government. But more likely, one or more participating organizations—or emerging social entrepreneurs from a community—will seize the opportunity to own well-tested ideas with a built-in coalition of supporters. The scope of ambition here may be hyper-local or transnational, depending on resources. In many scenarios, pilot implementation may precede policy decisions and serve as test

cases that demonstrate the viability and value of a particular approach. Actions like this—though generated through structured deliberation—will likely operate independently. The test cases provide experience in the field that can then be brought back to inform new rounds of iteration on the core proposals.

METHODOLOGY

The model presented here is intended as a guideline for working in the real world. Different kinds of organizations will apply it differently. But the core functional elements should remain constant: 1) deliberation among diverse stakeholders around a focused, problem-solving agenda; and 2) iteration of research, deliberation, knowledge transfer, and pilot projects over a period of time that tracks the arc of policy decision making within public institutions. This method of work seeks to bridge the gap in the policy marketplace between private/civic sector expertise and public sector implementation, and in the process generate new modes of civic participation that bind the people leading in the private and civic sectors together with the people making decisions in their government.

This is idealistic by design. But let's be clear, the most common result will be failure. That is a reality

that risk-averse public and civic institutions shun, but it is a truism in the commercial market of start-ups. Any institution practicing this method should expect to tackle twice as many issues but to fail a third of the time. These failures should happen early in the process and trigger either a total reset or a pivot to a different approach. The measure of success should not be whether a single round of collaborative policymaking achieved a demonstrable result. The measure of success is the speed and quality of adaptation in the next attempt of a sustained effort to make change. The goal here is to increase informed, collaborative participation of citizens and their public service organizations in the processes of self government. The method is the message.

Civic Enterprise—Examples

What does this look like in practice? Here are two examples. One recounts the experience of the Stiftung Neue Verantwortung (SNV) in Berlin and its work on electronic surveillance policy in Germany. The SNV has

pioneered the civic enterprise methods and achieved extraordinary results. The second offers a hypothetical example on education policy to demonstrate how civic enterprise might be applied at the municipal level.

Surveillance

The project began almost three years ago with this question: How should German policymakers respond to disclosures about NSA mass surveillance in the Snowden papers? The research sprint reached the conclusion that any effort to demand policy change from Washington would first require establishing a modernized standard of surveillance policy in Europe that reset a legitimate balance of privacy and security interests. Germany not only lacked such a standard, its statutes arguably did less to control electronic surveillance than the Americans. If Berlin did not lead by example, there could be no expectation of a reaction from London or Washington.

The hypotheses taken into the stress testing phase was focused on the proposition that Germany could become the world leader in the democratic legitimacy of its oversight of government surveillance. Through a series of workshops over the course of many months, this proposition endured. The policy proposals developed

by the researchers were vigorously contested, revised, reshaped, and strengthened over time. The SNV refined its model of collaborative hypothesis testing and built a network of experts that participated in the co-creation of the proposals published along the way. The group included judges, law professors, civic activists, corporate executives, human rights organizations, journalists, bureaucrats, and political thought leaders from every major party. The project continually anticipated the problems encountered by the parliament's inquiry committee [which ran in parallel] and adapted to account for changing circumstances and politics. SNV experts were invited to testify before the committee and brief its members. The conclusions from the project were published in trade journals and national newspapers. The thesis and approach forged through collaborative policy development process ultimately appeared at the center of the debate over reform legislation currently pending review in the German parliament.

Computer Science Education

Recently, the Obama administration announced a commitment that every K-12 student should receive instruction in computer science. Alongside \$4 billion in new funding, the proposal offers a vision of modernization of America's school curricula and teacher training. The question for school districts in cities and towns across the country is how to achieve this in practice. Challenges abound. There is no standard to certify or train computer science educators in any state. There are no guidelines for an effective curriculum. There is little clarity from the private sector about what skills and knowledge would be most appropriate and enduringly useful in this fast-moving field. And the views of parents, teachers, and students in each locality have yet to be weighed in the context of programmatic customization.

The task here for civic enterprise is to make a policy intervention at the municipal level to develop and test models for computer science education in K-12 schools.

There are clear gaps in public sector knowledge, skills, and relationships on this topic that warrant support. The research sprint would likely involve a review of prior curriculum overhauls on other topics, evaluations of current computer science education pilot programs, and assessment of feasibility and cursory survey of local opinion. The testing phase would require a series of iterative, deliberative sessions with a variety of stakeholders, including teachers, students, computer science experts, technology companies, school administrators, community leaders, parents, and city officials. The results of those discussions would yield a fertile crop of working ideas to socialize with a broader audience. Any school that stepped forward to pilot a program would get the accompanying support of the network assembled by the project. Initial results would feed back into further deliberation and revision with the aim of generating a scalable, adaptable model for the city and beyond.

CONCLUSION

The civic enterprise method delivers value even if it doesn't always make change. Here are some reasons why.

- Civic enterprise develops a network of trusted partners that stretch across sectors (business, civil society, academia, and government). Over time, this community develops relationships and ad hoc partnerships that increase the likelihood that they will participate again. A high turnout rate is a sign of vitality in the collaborative policy development process over time. So is the emergence of social entrepreneurship in local organizations to implement ideas tested in civic enterprise.
- Civic enterprise creates a mechanism to generate useful ideas for policymakers quickly. Public institutions often alienate citizens by delaying decisions through interminable process that—as likely as not—ends nonetheless with a hastily constructed decision driven by political pressure. This model proposes solutions fast and frequently, but its real virtue lies in the speed of adaptation to real world circumstances. A steady supply of proposals accelerates the process.
- The civic enterprise model dilutes the influence of concentrated wealth and power in public policy development. The method is transparent

(through persistent publication of results) and inclusive (because of multi-stakeholder participation). It embodies the values of pluralistic deliberation that it is meant to support.

Civic enterprise is a holistic approach to organized, expertise-driven participation in solving public problems. Through this independent, multi-stakeholder platform for policy development, we establish a basis for agenda setting and raise the quality of policy debates. We deliver ideas for change informed by experts and community leaders tailored to match what policymakers need, when they need it, and in the form most relevant for implementation. We construct unusual constellations of stakeholders to help make sure the best ideas do not get lost in the contests between competing lobbies and political parties. We practice a method of collaborative testing and iteration that extracts and combines the best thinking from across sectors and seeks to apply it quickly both in a white paper and in the real world. We connect government to citizens and policy to action.



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