

## **EFFECTIVE WAYS TO INFLUENCE APPRECIATIVE SET POINTS? DELIBERATIVE MINI-PUBLICS AS SOCIO-TECHNICAL SYSTEMS CHANGE INITIATIVES**

**Rosalma (Rosa) Zubizarreta-Ada**  
**Senior Fellow at the Research Institute for Sustainability**  
**rzubizarreta-ada@email.fielding.edu**

### **Abstract**

How might systems perspectives, including socio-technical systems change, cybernetics, and organization development, deepen our learning from existing experiments with sortition-based deliberative mini-publics? In this paper, I apply these lenses to the results of recent natural experiments where a cross-section of the larger system (a given socio-political system, not an organization) is invited to develop shared recommendations for a given policy area; in the process, participants generally also develop a greater sense of agency. Since these mini-publics can produce significant shifts in the system's "imaginal field" or Overton window of possibilities, they can be seen as responses to Vicker's call for ethical ways to influence the appreciative set-points of our socio-cultural system. Sometimes this influence occurs through large-scale narrative diffusion, as with the 1991 "People's Verdict" sponsored by Maclean's in response to a growing risk of separatism in Canada. Other times, built-in design elements increase the likelihood of sponsoring bodies adopting some or all of a microcosm's recommendations, such as the feedback loops in the Citizens' Council model from Vorarlberg, Austria. Yet even with a growing number of different formats worldwide and variations with regard to implementation, we see repeatedly that regular people, chosen by public lottery and offered a supportive interaction context, find value in exploring public issues together and work through differences to arrive at meaningful shared recommendations. Analogous to McGregor's "theory X / theory Y", a different pattern of behavior emerges in the context of intentionally designed and facilitated processes where each participant is respected and heard. Regardless of local design variants, in supportive contexts we repeatedly witness humans' desire to take responsibility for improving collective life, and ability to navigate nuance and complexity.

### **Keywords**

Citizens' Assemblies, appreciative systems, Vickers, deliberative mini-publics, socio-technical systems

### **1 | Introduction**

For at least 50 years now, notable systems thinkers such as Gregory Bateson (e.g. Guddemi, 2011) and Sir Geoffrey Vickers (e.g. Blunden, 1994) have seen clearly that our current way of life is unsustainable. Yet what to do about these challenges? From the perspective of complex adaptive systems, one might notice various evolutionary adaptations happening "at the fringes" where evolution continually occurs, including the development of organic agriculture, new sustainable energy technologies, and community rights movements challenging corporate privilege. Yet these constructive innovations do not appear to be keeping pace with the destructive forces fueling the interlocking crises – from unchecked greed in the form of capital accumulation, to divide-and-conquer tactics resulting in growing societal polarization.

Joanna Macy's "The Great Turning" framework (2009) identifies three categories of actions needed for societal transformation: 1) protective actions that slow down harms; 2) the creation of new alternatives and 3) shifts in consciousness. Donella Meadows also wrote about shifts in consciousness as significant leverage points for systems transformation (1999). Here I will focus on innovative forms (2) of public engagement and collaborative governance that can generate shifts in consciousness (3) which, using Sir Geoffrey Vickers' terminology, change the set-points of our appreciative systems (1995/1965).

## Effective Ways to Influence Appreciative Set Points? Deliberative Mini-Publics as STS Change Initiatives

Currently, calls for democratic innovation are coming from very different locations in our larger societal system. For example, the Organization for Economic Co-Operation and Development's [OECD] (2020) research on Citizens' Assemblies and other sortition-based formats, frames this work as a necessary response to rising public mistrust of government. Designed to bring together a cross-section of the public, these democratic innovations offer regular people opportunities for considered input into the policy process. At the same time, activists frustrated with governments' inadequate response to the climate crisis are also advocating for Citizens' Assemblies, one of Extinction Rebellion's (2019) three demands. Both activists and critical theorists want Assemblies to have a more transformative remit than governments are generally willing to assign (Hammond, 2020), and much greater implementation of their outcomes than has occurred to date. Yet it is striking to witness the convergence between institutional actors and activists on the point that current crises need processes that solicit and integrate the considered input of a diverse public.

These cross-sectional democratic innovations are known as "deliberative mini-publics" (Ryan & Smith, 2014) and Citizens' Assemblies are the largest and most well-known, though far from the only ones. A growing variety of formats share three basic principles in common: 1) random selection + stratification to create a microcosm of the larger whole; 2) in-depth exploration of the issue at hand; and 3) the intention of having real impact on the larger system (OECD, 2020). One well-studied example has been the Ireland Citizens' Assembly of 2016, where 99 randomly-selected participants chaired by a Supreme Court judge explored a handful of weighty topics: a) abortion; b) responding to the challenges of an aging population; c) climate change; d) the referenda process; and e) fixed-term parliament. Deliberations took place over 11 weekends spread out over 18 months. One significant outcome had to do with abortion. After studying and deliberating on the matter, the Assembly produced a report for Parliament recommending a public referendum. Parliament was emboldened enough to put the question to the vote, asking the Irish population at large whether the 8th Amendment to the Constitution guaranteeing the "right to life" should be repealed; 66.4% of those who turned out to vote approved the referendum and repealed the amendment. Officials' changed willingness to engage this issue, a shift in the "Overton window" of what they considered possible, led to a clear outcome in this instance; even those who disagreed with the majority's vote generally found the process to be fair and inclusive (Courant, 2021; Sorial, 2023).

From the perspective of Sir Geoffrey Vickers and appreciative systems, we can see these deliberative processes as one response to his call for *ethical ways to influence the appreciative set-points of our socio-cultural system*. While Vickers did not negate the value of action, his focus was on the relatively neglected aspect of mindset and values. Thus he described his construct of "appreciative systems" as the systems of values and patterns, at both individual and societal levels, which influence what we are able to see and notice. A given appreciative system's "set-point" could be seen as analogous to the setting on a thermostat; yet Vickers' focus was on the human process of choosing the thermostat setting. Given our rapidly changing environment, we need to be able to ethically change the "set-point" on our appreciative systems, to better respond to changing circumstances (Vickers, 1995/1965, 1970). For example, given the scientific consensus on the current climate crisis, how might we shift our cultural "appreciative set-point" regarding patterns of consumption, along with underlying beliefs about the need for perpetual economic growth that fuel those patterns? It is only on the basis of the facts that we are able to see as relevant, as well as the values that we use as a yardstick, that we can decide what kinds of legislation might be needed.

Given that today's innovative deliberative processes are designed to avoid both coercion and propaganda, and instead foster greater awareness and shifts in perspective through a respectful exploration of differences, they appear to qualify as an ethical way to influence both individual and shared appreciative systems. In fact, the examples that Vickers used to illustrate the process of shifts in appreciation, were Commissions that had been explicitly set up for the purpose of exploring needed changes in policy (1995/1965). To my knowledge, Vickers did not consider that something analogous to these Commissions could be generalized and spread in the way that deliberative mini-publics are

## Effective Ways to Influence Appreciative Set Points? Deliberative Mini-Publics as STS Change Initiatives

currently doing today; yet my hunch is that he would have been quite pleased to witness this phenomenon.

However, large Citizens' Assemblies can be quite expensive to run. Even with their size and expense, questions have been raised about the degree to which the larger population is aware of their work. In addition to calls for greater connections between mini-publics and larger publics, there have also been repeated calls for more economical formats that can be used at smaller levels of scale. Thus I will focus here on some smaller and more accessible instances that, while not as well-known in the literature, have had significant influence within their own contexts. Additionally, their design and implementation illustrate some significant systems concepts.

I will then zoom out to explore some key findings that occur repeatedly, across a great variety of mini-public formats. These include the positive value that participants generally find in the opportunity to explore collective action challenges in a shared context of dignity, respect, and empathy, and the greater sense of personal agency that frequently arises (Ehsassi, 2024). After exploring the implications of these recurring findings for our beliefs about human beings, I will explore the role of process design and group facilitation in creating these transformational contexts.

### 2 | The People's Verdict

The first Citizens' Assembly took place in British Columbia in 2004, with 160 randomly-selected participants, and inspired other subsequent experiments, including the Irish Assemblies (Lang, 2007). Yet these large-scale assemblies were preceded by an earlier wave of experiments with smaller forms of public engagement; many of these more compact formats continue to be in use today, including Citizens' Juries and Planning Cells (Smith & Wales, 2000).

In 1991, a small yet significant democratic experiment took place in Canada. In a time of intense polarization over Quebec's potential secession, Maclean's weekly newsmagazine worked with a polling firm to bring together a very diverse group of 12 Canadians who, together, reflected the larger diversity of their country. Maclean's also contracted with Harvard Law School Professor Roger Fisher, founder of the Harvard Negotiation Project, to bring a team of mediators to facilitate this potentially fractious gathering over the course of a long and intensive weekend (Maclean's, 1991b; Co-Intelligence Institute, n.d.).

By the end of their time together, participants had developed some unexpected and heartwarming relationships with others whom they initially viewed as adversaries; in addition, group members had co-created and signed a detailed four-page draft vision statement for a future Canada to which they would *all* want to belong. As the Maclean's editors wrote, this document was *not* intended "to be a definitive statement on the shape of a future Canada, but a realistic basis for further discussion and refinement". Equally important was the way this group had arrived at their shared vision: "using a process under which people with dramatically different points of view could reach agreement fairly quickly, and without acrimony, on a wide range of issues", and which could also "be extended to address other issues" (Maclean's, 1991a, p. 52).

The four-page vision statement was only a fraction of the nearly 40 pages of in-depth coverage that Maclean's dedicated to this gathering, in a special print issue titled "*The People's Verdict: How Canadians can Agree Upon their Future*" (1991b). Having recorded the entire process on film, Canadian TV produced *The People's Accord*, an hour-long video showing emotional highlights from the weekend, screened at dialogue events across Canada as a catalyst for subsequent conversation (Atlee, 2022, 2019).

Yet this significant social experiment was framed as a journalistic experiment, not as quantitative research. While the organizers hired Professor Fisher and team to facilitate the process, no one ran before-and-after opinion polls to measure the societal effects. Given that the impact on public opinion was *not* measured, it could be tempting to conclude that therefore there *was* no impact. Yet while this historic instance remains largely unexplored in the deliberative literature to date, the significant public documentation it generated offers instructive examples of the narrative feedback loops through which a larger system can learn about the work of a small yet extremely diverse microcosm.

## Effective Ways to Influence Appreciative Set Points? Deliberative Mini-Publics as STS Change Initiatives

### 3 | The Vorarlberg Bürgerräte

In 2005, organizational consultant Matthias zur Bensen invited Jim Rough, a quality consultant and the creator of Dynamic Facilitation, to teach in Germany. One of the participants was Manfred Hellrigl, former director of the Office for Future-Related Issues (Büro für Zukunftsfragen) of the State of Vorarlberg, Austria. Hellrigl's office had previously experimented with a variety of engagement processes, including Planning Cells and Citizen Juries. They found Rough's Wisdom Council model, based on the agile Dynamic Facilitation approach, to be a useful and affordable way for convening and hosting small randomly-selected Councils (Hellrigl & Lederer, 2014).

Over time, the Büro adapted this approach to their local needs, renaming it “Bürgerräte” (Civic Councils or Citizens’ Councils). After a Council of 15-20 people meets for an intensive weekend, they share their work with the larger community at a “BürgerCafé”, the first of two key feedback loops. Held shortly after the conclusion of the Councils’ work, the Café offers Council members an opportunity to present their outcomes, including the story of their shared explorations, at a public meeting hosted using the World Café methodology. The elected officials and public administrators who sponsored the Bürgerrat are present to formally open the BürgerCafé, and then stay throughout the evening to witness the community’s response to the Council’s recommendations. This format encourages participation among all attendees, as an initial large-group presentation is followed by a series of structured small-group conversations. The final large-group plenary is an opportunity for everyone in the room to hear highlights from the small-group dialogues (Zubizarreta, Paice, & Cuffy, 2020; OECD, 2020; Hellrigl & Lederer, 2014).

The second feedback loop developed by Hellrigl and his team is the Responder’s Group (sometimes called a Resonance Group.). This group consists of members from the various government departments and non-profits who will need to implement a given Councils’ recommendations, along with a few volunteer community members. Charged with tracking the Councils’ recommendations as they move through the labyrinth of officialdom, this group meets monthly for six months. They then report back to the public regarding the fate of the Council’s recommendations; which ones have been implemented, which ones not, and why (Zubizarreta, Paice, & Cuffy, 2020; Hellrigl & Lederer, 2014).

In 2013, the State of Vorarlberg institutionalized the Bürgerrat process by amending the State Constitution. At that point, the Office for Future-Related Issues had conducted around 30 well-documented Councils using the Bürgerrat model, at town, local, and state-wide levels. The new Constitutional amendment specified a minimum of one state-level Council per year; the topic can be chosen by the Governor’s office, the State Congress, or by the citizens, by means of a petition with at least 1,000 signatures (OECD, 2020, p. 138).

A few years later, the State Government asked the Büro to conduct the fifth state-wide Bürgerrat on the difficult topic of the growing number of refugees and asylum-seekers in Vorarlberg. Participants in this Council initially responded with significant frustration upon learning the actual facts and figures in the opening presentations. “Why have we not been told this before??” was the prevalent response upon first hearing information that the local government had previously not been particularly eager to publicize. Yet this Council also included a few members with immigrant backgrounds, and the opportunity to hear some of their personal narratives brought out the human dimension of the problem. In the Council’s final recommendations, they asked the government to share information about the situation of refugee and asylum-seekers more widely, through a series of official news-magazines; they also recommended a series of public forums across the State where the Council findings could be shared, and where community members could have the opportunity to volunteer to help in various capacities. The State followed through on both recommendations (Participedia, n.d.; personal communications with Manfred Hellrigl, Michael Lederer, and Martin Rausch.)

The Büro für Zukunftsfragen, now the Büro für Freiwilliges Engagement und Beteiligung (Office for Voluntary Engagement and Participation), is continually learning and refining their approach. The demand for their work continues to grow, and the model has spread to other parts of Austria, Switzerland, and Germany. In 2020, the Vorarlberg Bürgerräte were honored by their inclusion in the OECD’s report, as #6 on their list of 12 different deliberative mini-public models.

## **Effective Ways to Influence Appreciative Set Points? Deliberative Mini-Publics as STS Change Initiatives**

### **4 | Outcomes that arise from creating a climate of dignity, empathy, and respect**

Now I will “zoom out” from particular instances and specific formats, to consider variations and commonalities among the increasing number of different “makes and models” of deliberative mini-publics. One significant variation has to do with the implementation of mini-publics’ recommendations, which often depends on the quality of prior relationships built between organizers and local politicians and public administrators. Public impact also varies depending upon resources available for communicating mini-public results to the larger public; the degree to which public input has been invited in during earlier points of the process, also varies (Dryzek, 2015). Even when a deliberative assembly’s recommendations are brought to the public afterward via a referendum, outcomes are variable: sometimes the public approves, as with the Irish Assembly of 2019; other times, as with the first Canadian Citizens’ Assembly, the subsequent referendum is not approved by voters.

Yet a different kind of outcome has been highly consistent, across a wide diversity of minipublic formats and contexts. As practitioners, organizers, researchers, and observers, we repeatedly witness how “regular people” chosen by means of public lottery (sortition) and offered a supportive interaction context, find great value and meaning in exploring public issues together. Participants learn a great deal about the issue at hand, and in many cases are able to work through their differences to arrive at some set of meaningful shared recommendations. In addition, they often show a strong and significant increase in their sense of personal agency (Ehsassi, 2024).

These repeated findings are of particular interest, given that the primary intention is generally NOT the development of participants’ sense of personal and collective agency. Rather, rationales frequently focus on epistemic value – coming up with better policy – or legitimation: rebuilding public trust in government, by offering ordinary people an opportunity for input into policy recommendations. Interestingly, the inverse also happens; mini-publics often generate greater trust from local elected officials and public administrators toward the public. This is understandable, given that minipublics offer public administrators a very different experience of “the public.”

Clearly, context affects human behavior; in turn, we humans can design different kinds of contexts, which then elicit different kinds of behavior. This kind of “circular interaffecting” is something Vickers often points to, as does Follett (1918/1998). A parallel in the field of organization development is Douglas McGregor’s “theory X / theory Y”, developed to make sense of the repeated finding that different kinds of leadership assumptions and behaviors elicit significantly different responses from workers (McGregor, 1960/1985; Sorensen & Minahan, 2011). In the case of mini-publics, we see very different behavior emerging among community members in a context designed to ensure that each participant is respected and heard, in contrast to a process that is designed to be adversarial.

In sum, in supportive contexts, we repeatedly witnessed humans’ desire to take responsibility for collective action challenges, as well as the ability to navigate nuance and complexity. These experiences show, over and over again, human beings’ potential to care deeply about public issues and to work constructively with one another, given a context that respects differences (Dryzek et al., 2019). The corollary to this finding, mentioned less frequently, is the power of group facilitation to bring out the best in human beings, by creating an inclusive atmosphere of empathy, listening, dignity and respect.

### **5 | The role of facilitative leadership in creatively engaging diversity**

From a systems perspective, we know that bringing people together from different parts of a system and facilitating a collaborative sense-making process is a form of systemic practice. As Otto Scharmer (2015) writes: “Dialogue is not people talking to each other. Dialogue is the capacity of a system to see itself.” The dialogical process of helping a system to see itself has also been described as Conversational Leadership (Hurley and Brown, 2009). As mentioned above, one significant commonality among the growing number of models for deliberative mini-publics is that virtually all of them make use of some form of facilitation or moderation.

Yet in deliberative democracy, the role of the facilitator or moderator in “helping a system see itself” has been significantly understudied, to the point where facilitation has been described as

## Effective Ways to Influence Appreciative Set Points? Deliberative Mini-Publics as STS Change Initiatives

“indispensable to deliberative practice, yet [...] largely absent from deliberative theory” (Moore, 2012, p. 147). Some have connected this paradoxical oversight to the general absence of leadership considerations in deliberative democracy (Landwehr, 2014; see also Kuyper, 2012). In any case, we can now celebrate a growing interest in the work of facilitators within the fields of deliberative democracy and democratic innovations, most recently in the work of Oliver Escobar (2019, 2017, 2015, 2011). Meanwhile, in the neighboring field of participatory planning, John Forester has long been looking closely at the practical work of supporting dialogue, debate, and principled negotiation within multi-stakeholder processes (2013, 2009, 2006, 1999).

Deliberative mini-publics are not the only context where facilitation is key. Without someone in this role, working well with extremely diverse perspectives can be quite challenging. According to Bettenhausen's (1991) in-depth review of research on small-group dynamics in organizational studies, most studies found that “diversity hinders group and organizational performance, especially in times of crisis or rapid change”; this means that “the advantages provided by multiple perspectives are offset by problems of generating consensus” (1991, p. 356). One response to this challenge has been the construct of “considerate leadership” (Homan & Greer, 2013) based on findings that *creating safety and encouraging the acknowledgment and appreciation of individual differences* has a positive impact on diverse groups addressing complex tasks. Other work has explored the impact of an “affiliative lens” on group development (White, Mcmillen, & Baker, 2001). Today, we might use the term “relational” to describe approaches which recognize that groups' developmental pathways are influenced by the quality of the container, which in turn is created by some combination of structural design and/or facilitative leadership (e.g., Culmsee & Awati, 2012).

In a public engagement context, Creighton (2005) has described the work of facilitators as creating climates of “mutual respect and psychological safety” that allow participants to “consider creative new solutions and move from preconceived positions” (p. 169). Facilitation practitioners working in multiple sectors can see parallels between the work of facilitators and mediators in public engagement contexts, in planning contexts, and in mini-public contexts. Similarly, those of us who work as organizational consultants can see significant overlaps between facilitative leadership as a way to support positive outcomes in diverse groups, and the work of group facilitators.

However, some deliberative democracy literature explores the recurring concern that the need to hire external process designers, facilitators, and evaluators, might carry the (contaminating) values of the “market” into the (deliberative) world of the “forum” (Hendricks & Carson, 2008). Clearly corporate domination is a huge problem in the world today; participation can be co-opted to present the appearance, rather than the substance, of democracy; and in both the business realm as well as the public realm, facilitators sometimes play an unwitting role in this. At the same time, we know that facilitators themselves can face ethical pressure from demands made by governmental sponsors of deliberation (Parry, 2024). And as De Oliveira (2021) points out, we have *all* been conditioned by the values of neoliberalism and modernism – not just those of us in direct contact with the business world. Still, there are honorable professionals in different fields doing their best to enact democratic values in their area of practice (Dzur, 2019). It may even be possible that some of the knowledge about human collaboration developed in the ‘belly of the beast’ could be of some use to us, as we seek to create new human systems, whether new organizations, new governance structures, and/or new economic systems. We might think of this, as recycling and upcycling at their best.

Of course, knowledge about group facilitation has also been developed outside of the field of management and organizational studies. Most notably, much group process expertise has developed within community organizing, social change, and activist communities, as well as within intentional communities. While the larger topic is beyond the scope of this paper, I will briefly note that in the U.S., the work of the Movement for a New Society has rippled out into many social change initiatives, and notable books on facilitation have emerged from facilitators' experiences in activist communities (e.g. Starhawk, 2011; brown, 2021, 2017). Given how key facilitation is for working productively with diverse perspectives, one of deliberative mini-publics' most fruitful contributions could be to promote the large-scale cultivation of facilitative mindsets and skillsets. A whole-scale effort to increase “facilitative

## Effective Ways to Influence Appreciative Set Points? Deliberative Mini-Publics as STS Change Initiatives

capacity” among the public at large, aimed toward developing both lay practitioners and professionals, could be a key ingredient toward increasing public deliberative capacity in the larger system. Both movement facilitators and professional facilitators are already working toward this larger goal; financial and moral support could greatly amplify these efforts.

### 6 | Patterns of Narrative Influence

The two examples above, the Canadian People’s Verdict and the Vorarlberg Bürgerräte in Austria, show how small yet diverse microcosms can influence larger systems. I will briefly mention one additional example of this pattern, the Mont Fleur scenario work facilitated in South Africa in 1991-1992 by Adam Kahane, which has been credited for contributing to a peaceful transition from apartheid (Kahane, n.d.). While not a randomly-selected microcosm, the participants in these dialogues were intentionally chosen to reflect the political diversity present in South Africa at the time. Kahane led a well-designed and well-facilitated week-long process that began by tapping into participants’ hopes, fears, and visions for the future. After the dialogues concluded, among the many ways the organizers shared their outcomes was to invite street-theater performers to create plays to enact in local communities, as an accessible means of communicating what this small yet highly diverse group had learned together (personal communication, Kahane).

Both the Canadian Experiment and the Mont Fleur dialogues illustrate how a small, highly diverse microcosm can ethically influence the appreciative system of the larger whole, contributing to a shift in appreciative set-points through what I am calling “intentional narrative diffusion.” In addition, the example of the Vorarlberg Councils shows how minipublics can be designed to include multiple feedback loops, and how a smaller, less-expensive version of mini-publics can grow and spread at a local level.

As mentioned earlier, there is usually no guarantee that a mini-public’s recommendations will be implemented; implementation can vary a great deal depending on the context. In addition, different designs, methodologies, and facilitation professionals vary in their ability to welcome conflict and to deal constructively with conflict; in turn, this means that the transformative power of these mini-publics also varies. And even when these experiments work well, to have lasting impact they need to take place in a recursive manner, instead of as a one-off experience. Yet mini-publics consistently offer meaningful and often transformative experiences for participants; in addition, mini-publics also offer the possibility for larger societal impact, especially to the degree that their narratives can be shared well and widely enough to influence our shared appreciative systems.

### 7 | Limitations and promising directions

With regard to the limitations of mini-publics, the risks of “participation-washing” cannot be overstated. This work is vulnerable to being done for appearances’ sake only, which is counterproductive with regard to building trust as that can leave a great deal of cynicism in its wake. Yet deliberative mini-publics have other limitations as well. In spite of the enormous enthusiasm this democratic innovation has awakened in many advocates, we know that mini-publics are *not* the one-stop solution to all of the challenges we face. The practical need to engage in different kinds of political action depending on the circumstances has been clearly acknowledged by practitioners and theorists in the field (e.g., Levine, 2018; Levine & Nierras, 2007; Fung, 2005). Both deliberative dialogues and non-violent civil disobedience can be seen as intrinsic elements of the democratic process. Thus, rather than being in competition, mini-publics and principled protest have the potential to complement one another as part of skillful practice.

At the same time, there have already been instances where governments have attempted to use the existence of a mini-public as a rationale for de-legitimizing protest, thus attempting to pit these two forms of democratic participation against each other (personal communication, Dimitri Courant). Also, since the moral power of deliberative mini-publics is based on the diversity of perspectives that participants bring, the tendency to focus on progressive outcomes creates an ongoing risk that these innovations will be perceived as simply another way to push forward a “progressive agenda.”

In response to critiques regarding mini-publics’ expense, some are experimenting with using AI facilitators as a way to lower costs and make mini-publics more available. However, a different way to

## Effective Ways to Influence Appreciative Set Points? Deliberative Mini-Publics as STS Change Initiatives

address the problem of scale is, to work toward making the skills of human facilitation and mediation much more widely available. After all, the more people who can “hold space” for constructive group explorations and difficult conversations, the more of us can actively engage as participants in the work of creating desired futures.

While there has been a growing emphasis on applying a systems lens to the study of deliberative democracy (Curato & Böker, 2016; Dryzek, 2015; Mansbridge et al, 2012; Parkinson & Mansbridge, 2012), an in-depth review of work in this area is beyond the scope of this paper. Here I have simply shared a few examples that illustrate some ways that feedback loops between mini-publics and the larger societal system can be strengthened. In addition, I have advocated for increasing “deliberative capacity” in the larger system, by increasing “facilitative capacity” among the population at large; I have also pointed to some resources from other fields that could help us in this endeavor.

Here I am only gesturing toward the possibility, of exploring how Vickers’ perspective on appreciative systems could be used to understand more deeply, what happens *within* mini-publics. Further work could be done applying the frame of learning systems (Blackmore, 2005) as a fruitful way of understanding the transformations that so often happen within mini-publics. For this, we would need a deeper consideration of *what kinds* of learning are taking place; to date, much of the focus in mini-publics has been on “teaching” rather than on fostering constructivist learning. (For further insight on this, see Boswell, 2021.)

As for what difference any of this might make in our world today... given our present circumstances, “*Freedom in a Rocking Boat*” (Vickers, 1971) is an apt metaphor for the current state of many of our societies. Yet regardless of what scenario the future may hold with respect to the disintegration, transformation, and re-integration of our current systems, we will still need the “listening arts” that bring out the best in us humans. Consequently, one of deliberative mini-publics’ most fruitful contributions could be to highlight the value of these arts, and to promote their large-scale cultivation.

### 8 | Coda

In 1968, Gregory Bateson organized a small interdisciplinary conference at Burg Wartenstein in Austria, to explore how humans’ narrow focus on instrumental reason can lead us to the brink of disaster. He invited his oldest daughter to attend and document the proceedings. In the epilogue to *Our Own Metaphor*, Mary Catherine Bateson’s first-person account of this gathering, she describes its most significant aspect as the search for “a new pattern of inherently diverse information exchange and decision-making, a new mode of conversation toward which we were feeling our way when we met.” (1991/1972, p. 314).

We might consider the experience of participants in these intentionally diverse microcosms, as an example of a “new pattern of inherently diverse information exchange,” a group exploration of collective action challenges, in a context where each person is listened to and treated with respect. A great majority of participants across all instances of mini-publics, report the willingness to take part in future group opportunities of this kind. Many have been deeply moved by the discovery of their own agency as humans who care about our shared future, who can develop nuanced understandings of complex issues, and who, given a supportive context, are able to work in collaboration with diverse others toward shared worlds. I believe Sir Geoffrey Vickers would quite approve.

### Acknowledgements

The idea for this paper was conceived during the time I was a Democracy Visiting Fellow at the Harvard Kennedy School’s Ash Center; I am very grateful for that opportunity. The bulk of the writing has been done as a Senior Fellow at the Research Institute for Sustainability, where significant work takes place with multi-stakeholder engagement and deliberative mini-publics as a way to support societal transformations toward sustainability.

## Effective Ways to Influence Appreciative Set Points? Deliberative Mini-Publics as STS Change Initiatives

### References

- Atlee, T. (2022). Democracy Rising 23: Scaling Deliberation—the Maclean’s magazine experiment. *Resilience, A program of the Post-Carbon Institute*. August 2, 2022. <https://www.resilience.org/stories/2022-08-02/democracy-rising-23-scaling-deliberation-the-macleans-magazine-experiment/>. Accessed on October 6, 2024.
- Atlee, T. (2019). Can a small citizen deliberation have more impact than a giant one? Blog post from *Random Communications from an Evolutionary Edge*, October 27, 2019. <https://www.tomatleeblog.com/archives/175328077>. Accessed on October 6, 2024.
- Bateson, M. C. (1991, 1972). *Our Own Metaphor*. Washington and London: Smithsonian Institution Press.
- Blackmore, C. (2005). Learning to Appreciate Learning Systems for Environmental Decision-Making: A ‘Work in Progress’ Perspective. *Systems Research and Behavioral Science*, 22, 329-341.
- Blunden, M. (1994). Vickers and Postliberalism. *American Behavioral Scientist*, 38:1, 11-25.
- Bettenhausen, K. L. (1991). Five years of groups research: What we have learned and what needs to be addressed. *Journal of Management*, 17(2), 345-381. doi:10.1177/014920639101700205
- Boswell, J. Seeing Like a Citizen: How Being a Participant in a Citizens Assembly Changed Everything I thought I Knew about Deliberative Mini-Publics. *Journal of Deliberative Democracy*, 17(2), 1-12. Doi: <https://doi.org/10.16997/jdd.975>
- brown, adrienne maree (2017). *Emergent Strategy: Shaping Change, Changing Worlds*. Chico: AK Press.
- brown, adrienne maree (2021). *Holding Change: The Way of Emergent Strategy: Facilitation and Mediation*. Chico: AK Press.
- Co-intelligence Institute (n.d.) Canadian Adversaries Take a Break to Dream: The Maclean's 1991 Experiment. <http://www.co-intelligence.org/S-Canadaadvsariesdream.html>, accessed on October 6, 2024.
- Courant, D. (2021). Citizens’ Assemblies for Referendums and Constitutional Reforms: Is There an “Irish Model” for Deliberative Democracy? *Frontiers of Political Science*, 2:591983. doi: 10.3389/fpos.2020.591983
- Creighton, J. L. (2005). *The public participation handbook: Making better decisions through citizen involvement*. Jossey-Bass.
- Culmsee, P., & Awati, K. (2012). Towards a holding environment: Building shared understanding and commitment in projects. *International Journal of Managing Projects in Business*, 5(3), 528-548. doi:10.1108/17538371211235353
- Curato, N. & Böker, M. (2016). Linking mini-publics to the deliberative system: a research agenda. *Policy Science* 49, 173-190.
- De Oliveira, V. M. (2021). *Hospicing modernity: Facing humanity's wrongs and the implications for social activism*. North Atlantic Books.
- Dryzek, J. S., Bächtiger, A., Chambers, S., Cohen, J., Druckman, J. N., Felicetti, A., & Fishkin, J. S., Farrell, D. M., Fung, A., Gutmann, A., Landemore, H., Mansbridge, J., Marien, S., Neblo, M. A., Niemeyer, S., Setälä, M., Slothuus, R., Suiter, J., Thompson, D., Warren, M. E. (2019). The Crisis of Democracy and the Science of Deliberation, *Science* 363 (6432):1144-1146.
- Dryzek, J. S. (2015). Deliberative engagement: the forum in the system. *Journal of Environmental Studies and Sciences*, 5, 750-754.
- Dzur, A. W. (2019). *Democracy inside: Participatory innovation in unlikely places*. Oxford.
- Ehsassi, M. H. (2024). *Activated Citizenship: The Transformative Power of Citizens’ Assemblies*. Routledge.
- Escobar, O. (2011). *Public dialogue and deliberation: A communication perspective for public engagement practitioners*. UK Beacons for Public Engagement.
- Escobar, O. (2015). Scripting deliberative policy-making: Dramaturgic policy analysis and engagement

## Effective Ways to Influence Appreciative Set Points? Deliberative Mini-Publics as STS Change Initiatives

- know-how. *Journal of Comparative Policy Analysis*, 17(3), 269–285.
- Escobar, O. (2017). Making it official: Participation professionals and the challenge of institutionalizing deliberative democracy. In L. Bherer, M. Gauthier & L. Simard (Eds.), *The professionalization of public participation*, 141–164. Routledge.
- Escobar, O. (2019). Facilitators: The micropolitics of public participation and deliberation. In S. Elstub & O. Escobar (Eds.), *Handbook of democratic innovation and governance*. Elgar.
- Extinction Rebellion. (2019). The Deliberative Rebellion. You-Tube Video.  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5mxldI71h0k&feature=youtu.be>
- Follett, M. P. (1918/1998). *The New State: Group organization, the solution of popular government*. Penn State Press.
- Forester, J. (1999). *The deliberative practitioner: Encouraging participatory planning processes*. The MIT Press.
- Forester, J. (2006). Challenges of Deliberation and Participation. *Les Ateliers De L'Éthique*, 1(2), 19-25.
- Forester, J. (2009). *Dealing with differences: Dramas of mediating public disputes*. Oxford University Press.
- Forester, J. (2013). *Planning in the face of conflict: The surprising possibilities of facilitative leadership*. American Planning Association / Planners Press.
- Fung, A. (2005). Deliberation before the revolution: Toward an ethics of deliberative democracy in an unjust world. *Political Theory*, 33(3), 397-419.
- Guddemi, P. (2011). Conscious purpose in 2010: Bateson's prescient warning. *Systems Research and Behavioral Science*, 28(5), 465-475.
- Hammond, M. (2020). Democratic deliberation for sustainability transformations: between constructiveness and disruption. *Sustainability: Science, Practice, and Policy*, 16:1, 220-230, <https://doi.org/10.1080/15487733.2020.1814588>
- Hellrigl, M. & Lederer, M. (2014). Wisdom Councils im öffentlichen Bereich. In R. Zubizarreta and M. zur Bonsen, eds, *Dynamic Facilitation: Die erfolgreiche Moderations-methode für schwierige und verfahrenre Situationen*. Weinheim and Basel: Beltz Verlag. English translation available at [https://www.diaprxaxis.net/wp-content/uploads/Hellrigl\\_Lederer\\_ed\\_4\\_0.pdf](https://www.diaprxaxis.net/wp-content/uploads/Hellrigl_Lederer_ed_4_0.pdf)
- Hendriks, C. M., & Carson, L. (2008). Can the market help the forum? Negotiating the commercialization of deliberative democracy. *Policy sciences*, 41, 293-313.
- Homan, A. C., & Greer, L. L. (2013). Considering diversity: The positive effects of considerate leadership in diverse teams. *Group Processes & Intergroup Relations*, 16, 105-125.
- Hurley, T. J. & Brown, J. (2009). Conversational Leadership: Thinking Together for A Change. *The Systems Thinker*, 20:9.
- Kahane, A. (n.d.) Mont Fleur Scenarios: envisioning South Africa's transition to democracy. Blog post at <https://reospartners.com/blog/mont-fleur-scenarios>. Accessed on October 12, 2024.
- Kuyper, J. W. (2012). Deliberative Democracy and the Neglected Dimension of Leadership, *Journal of Public Deliberation*: 8(1), Article 4.  
<http://www.publicdeliberation.net/jpd/vol8/iss1/art4>
- Landwehr, C. (2014). Facilitating deliberation: The role of impartial intermediaries in deliberative mini-publics. In K. Grönlund, A. Bachtiger, & M. Setälä, *Deliberative mini-publics: Involving citizens in the democratic process*, (pp. 77- 92). ECPR Studies Press.
- Lang, A. (2007). But is it for real? The British Columbia citizens' assembly as a model of state-sponsored citizen empowerment. *Politics & Society*, 35(1), 35-69.  
<https://doi.org/10.1177/0032329206297147>
- Levine, P. (2018). Habermas with a Whiff of Tear Gas: Nonviolent Campaigns and Deliberation in an Era of Authoritarianism, *Journal of Public Deliberation*, 14: 2 , Article 4. Available at: <https://www.publicdeliberation.net/jpd/vol14/iss2/art4>
- Levine, P. & Nierras, R. M. (2007) "Activists' Views of Deliberation," *Journal of Public Deliberation*: Vol. 3: Iss. 1, Article 4. Available at: <http://www.publicdeliberation.net/jpd/vol3/iss1/art4>
- Macy, J. (2009). The Great Turning: A shift from the Industrial Growth Society to a life-sustaining

## Effective Ways to Influence Appreciative Set Points? Deliberative Mini-Publics as STS Change Initiatives

- civilization. Center for Ecoliteracy. <https://www.ecoliteracy.org/article/great-turning>, accessed on September 30, 2024.
- Macleans, (1991a). To Clarify a Vision: The aim - A nation where all people feel at home and fairly treated. *Macleans' Special Report: The People's Verdict*, July 1, 1991, 104:25, 52-56.
- Macleans, (1991b). *Macleans' Special Report: The People's Verdict - How Canadians Can Agree on Their Future*, July 1, 1991, 104:25, 10-78.
- Mansbridge, J., Bohman, J., Chambers, S., Christiano, T., Fung, A., Parkinson, J., & Warren, M. E. (2012). A systemic approach to deliberative democracy. In J. Parkinson & J. Mansbridge (Eds.), *Deliberative systems: Deliberative democracy at the large scale* (pp. 1–26). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- McGregor, D. (1960/1985), *The Human Side of Enterprise*, McGraw-Hill, New York, NY.
- Meadows, D. (1999). Leverage Points: Places to intervene in a system. *The Sustainability Institute*. <https://donellameadows.org/archives/leverage-points-places-to-intervene-in-a-system/>, accessed on Sept. 30, 2024.
- Moore, A. (2012). Following from the front: Theorizing deliberative facilitation. *Critical Policy Studies*, 6(2), 146-162. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19460171.2012.689735>
- Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (2020). *Innovative citizen participation and new democratic institutions: Catching the deliberative wave*. OECD Publishing. <https://doi.org/10.1787/339306da-en>.
- Parkinson, J., & Mansbridge, J. (2012). *Deliberative systems: Deliberative democracy at the large scale*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Parry, L. J. (2024). Holding this space: navigating ethical issues in citizen deliberation. *Acta Politica*. <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41269-023-00329-z>
- Participedia, (n.d) Vorarlberg Citizen Council on Asylum and Refugee Policies, <https://participedia.net/case/5383>, accessed on Sept 4, 2024.
- Ryan, M., & Smith, G. (2014). Defining mini-publics. In K. Grönlund, A. Bachtinger, & M. Setälä, *Deliberative mini-publics: Involving citizens in the democratic process* (pp. 9-26). ECPR Studies Press.
- Scharmer, O. (2015). The Blind Spot: Uncovering the Grammar of the Social Field. *Huff PostScience*, 6/6/2015. <https://tinyurl.com/2dzrya8a>, accessed on Sept 4, 2024.
- Smith, G., & Wales, C. (2000). Citizens' juries and deliberative democracy. *Political studies*, 48(1), 51-65.
- Sorensen, P. F., & Minahan, M. (2011). McGregor's legacy: the evolution and current application of Theory Y management. *Journal of Management History*, 17(2), 178-192.
- Sorial, S. (2023). Can Citizen Assemblies Make a Difference to Constitutional Reform? Some Lessons from Ireland. In A. Olijnyk & A. Reilly, *The Australian Constitution and National Identity*, ANU Press.
- Starhawk, S. (2011). *The empowerment manual: A guide for collaborative groups*. New Society Publishers.
- White, J., Mcmillen, M. C., & Baker, A. C. (2001). Challenging traditional models: Toward an inclusive model of group development. *Journal of Management Inquiry*, 10(1), 40-57. doi:10.1177/1056492601101007
- Vickers, G. (1995/1965). *The Art of Judgment: A Study of Policy Making*. SAGE Publications.
- Vickers, G. (1970). *Value Systems and Social Processes*. Penguin Books.
- Vickers, G. (1971). *Freedom in a Rocking Boat*. Penguin Books.
- Zubizarreta, R., Paice, A., & Cuffy, M. (2020). Citizen's Councils: What are they, and why are they so popular in Austria? *Research and Development Notes, New Democracy Foundation*. <https://tinyurl.com/Zubi-Paice-Cuffy>