



# Climate Chaos, Cannabis, Housing Scarcity and Deliberation

A new decade in public  
engagement

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## **Climate Chaos, Cannabis, Housing Scarcity and Deliberation: A New Decade in Public Engagement**

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# Preface

Climate chaos, cannabis, housing scarcity and deliberation. These are confronting issues in public engagement. To represent the field of engagement through these issues might seem reductive. But their complexities share a common theme: How does community engagement navigate current global challenges? Equally, how can engaged communities meet the real demands and urgencies of our catastrophically changing environment? This is not to lay a blind spot bare. But serves to underpin a pivotal intersection between public engagement and the intractable issues facing our communities and our habituation in the twenty-first century.

Reading against the perceived pitfalls of public engagement in climate action, *Community engagement steps up participation in climate action* demonstrates how, at a local level, community engagement has the power to communicate the irreversible risks that climate chaos poses in a tangible way. This can impact the at 'arms-length' thinking that obfuscates the urgency of climate chaos competing with seemingly more immediate issues. *Online engagement rises to the global affordable housing challenge* looks at the inefficacy of tackling supply as a one-fix solution to housing stress, working poverty, unstable accommodation, homelessness and swelling population growth. For the narrow criteria simply doesn't reflect the array of community needs, reflections, ideas and input into housing issues. And, turning specifically to Canada – the first G7 country and only second in the world to fully legalise cannabis consumption – *Why Canada's Cannabis Act is a green-field opportunity for online engagement* identifies that coupling the volatility of an issue like cannabis with the requirement that local municipalities engage their communities presents fertile ground for online community participation.

Just as the legitimacy of democracy depends on a real – and tangible – link between the public and public policies, this ebook also asks, how can we make deliberative democracy practical – especially in the cacophony of self-sorting, information bubbles on social media? *Can deliberation renew democracy in a digital world?* looks at how deliberation might respond to challenges in an increasingly digital world. But also, how it can metabolise those challenges, where applying deliberative approaches to decisions could make better connections between the public's real concerns and how they are governed – a far cry from elections interpreting public preferences where votes are made (a prescient issue in current debates surrounding climate chaos and government inaction).

Organising these essays as a whole is the increasingly digital world we inhabit. Indeed, the uptake of digital technology balances less precariously in twenty-first-century community engagement. The turn to digital engagement and the efficacy with which it has been embraced shows it has the potential to bolster claims of a well-functioning democracy.

Here, digital engagement has been deployed to positive effect. From how deliberative democracy positively responds to digital technology – targeting misinformation, addressing accessibility and promoting participation and democratic literacy – to questioning whether housing scarcity might be better served by an online engagement approach to involve community in sustainable outcomes. (As demonstrated by the Canadian government’s national strategy through online engagement.) Alternately, dedicated online engagement around cannabis use, retail and regulation provides an opportunity for local governments and municipalities to build trust in – and speak directly with – their community, moving beyond a narrow, vociferous minority.

The need for increasing public participation – not to mention increasing the pathways to its augmentation – remains paramount to challenges communities face globally. Squarely facing issues of climate chaos and affordable housing through the lens of public engagement, for instance, local level engagement cuts through swathe of government inaction and the failure to communicate environmental urgency. Equally, with over 7.7 billion people on earth, a figure that has increased threefold since the 1950s, working with communities to improve housing affordability for vulnerable populations becomes a priority as equity-seeking residents and communities will be the most vulnerable to impacts of climate chaos.

Evidence-based with case examples from the UK, Canada, USA and Australia, this ebook not only serves as a commentary on issues that have challenged public engagement in 2019. But it brings together the transformative potential of engaged communities. Too often, in relation to themes as big as climate chaos, cannabis laws and housing scarcity, public discourse around community engagement is not developed and questions fall away. This is not to insist on their abiding connection. But to actively, and reflectively, comprehend their intractable intersection.



## Community engagement steps up participation in climate action

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Heatwaves. Hurricanes. Droughts. Floods. Fires. Temperatures pushed to record heights globally. January 2019 was Australia's hottest month ever, and one of three hottest summer months on record, reaching almost 50 degrees Celsius in some locations. Through higher mean temperatures and extreme shifts in rainfall patterns, anthropogenic or human-caused climate change, without doubt, is a primary driver in the upward trend in catastrophic climate events. While fires currently ablaze eastern states of Australia (one of the developed countries most exposed to climate change), climate chaos is accountable for the **deadliest and most destructive fires in Californian history** as well as fuelling **Europe's fires**. And it is accelerating at an unprecedented pace. Current warnings by the United Nations (UN) estimate climate crisis disasters at a rate of **one per week**. In addition, a UN report, released in September this year, lists climate change among major drivers pushing upwards of **a million species to extinction in coming years**. Couple catastrophic changes in biodiversity and climate catastrophe and societal collapse is inevitable.



## Radical warnings

But doubts about the veracity of carbon emissions are not new. The goal of reducing carbon emissions has been manifest for over thirty years. Despite efforts of the UN's series of international agreements, there seems little progress in reaching it. In fact, **emissions rose 2.7% in 2018**. Yet, **climate scientist James Hansen warned in 2006**, there was only a ten year window to stem "dangerous" climate change and "to alter fundamentally the trajectory of global green-house emissions." Fast forward to October 2018. The International Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) released a special report ***Global Warming of 1.5 °C***, reducing the current two-degree target. Its unequivocal findings warn of almost 400 million affected by water scarcity; almost 300 per cent population increase in tropical and sub-tropical margins; and, unprecedented extinction with gravely disrupted ecosystems. This against a backdrop of a rapidly rising population (with predictions of 10 billion by 2050) exponentially increasing demands on food, water and energy.

Far from exaggerating its threat, in an **article in *Scientific American*** in September this year, climate scientists warn the crisis is accelerating at an unpredicted pace and severity. Just this week, 11000 scientists from 153 nations **signed a scientific paper published in the journal *BioScience*** to coincide with the first world climate conference held in Geneva 40 years ago, declaring a climate emergency that **warns of "untold suffering due to climate crisis."** The domino effect of **climate chain reactions** will create irreversible tipping points, where large-scale disruption to ecosystems, societies and economies would make large swathes of earth uninhabitable. As writer and critic **James Bradley lucidly writes**: "If you're younger than sixty, you have a good chance of witnessing the radical **destabilization of life on earth**—massive crop failures, apocalyptic fires, imploding economies, epic flooding, hundreds of millions of refugees fleeing regions made uninhabitable by extreme heat or permanent drought. If you're under thirty, you're all but guaranteed to witness it."

## What's the hold up? The "false balance debate"

Debating the possible impacts of climate chaos – the "what if" – fails to acknowledge how much is already "baked" in. As Pulitzer prize-winning author of *The Sixth Extinction*, **Elizabeth Kolbert wrote**, "We are living in the climate of the past, but we've already determined the climate's future."<sup>1</sup> Presenting climate chaos as a future, theoretical possibility also feeds into a "false balance debate". Coined by **Dr Martin Rice**, CEO of Australian Climate Council, to put it loosely, this journalistic device frames climate change as a debate between 'sceptics' and 'believers' that inures the very catastrophe of climate

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<sup>1</sup> CO2 released into the atmosphere in the past decade is equal to that released in the first 200 years, half of which have taken place since 1991 with the last four years being the hottest on record.



crisis. That is, that the very notion of the legitimacy of climate change is up for debate creates a problem for how any discussion of action or engagement with climate change can be communicated to the community. (Indeed, as I write this, in Australia – which as David Attenborough vehemently attests “*is already facing* some of the most extreme manifestations of climate change” – the Deputy Prime Minister calls climate change believers “*raving inner-city lunatics*”, effectively *ignoring warnings*, where other political leaders claim climate change is an *irrefutable fact* of the catastrophic fires.) The “false balance” debate not only obfuscates the link between climate change and “catastrophic” danger but sidelines the veritable effects to health, transport, water, energy and emergency services facing communities.

This extends to uneven government action globally. While the New Zealand government’s recent *landmark climate legislation* – passing zero-carbon emissions by 2050 – is at the avante-garde of Federal governments who commit to transitioning to zero-carbon emission, others, including some of the biggest carbon emitters, have turned their back on international climate agreements and *undermined global action*.

### **Pitfalls of public participation in climate change**

*“The struggle to rein in global carbon emissions and keep the planet from melting down has the feel of Kafka’s fiction.” Jonathan Franzen, New Yorker<sup>2</sup>*

Indeed, engaging in climate action in countries that have the highest carbon footprint has been identified by global public opinion research consultancy GlobeScan as *one of three major pitfalls of public engagement on climate change*. That is, the public is least engaged in countries where climate action needed most. (Or as *The Economist* recently put it, “the unpalatable notion that  $\frac{3}{4}$  emissions come from just 12 economies.”) Citing *Pew Research Center*, GlobeScan demonstrates that “people in countries with high per-capita levels of carbon emissions are less intensely concerned about climate change.”

The other major pitfalls are the “view of urgency” and a “strong attitude-behaviour gap”.

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<sup>2</sup> Franzen, Jonathan, “*What if we stopped pretending?*” *New Yorker*, 8 September 2019.



The former sees climate chaos as a distant problem and less serious issue compared to more tangible issues. The latter refers to the fact that, while believing in climate chaos, people shy away from vocalising their commitment, perpetuating what is called a **climate change “spiral of silence”**.

To be sure, when the threat of climate chaos is perceived as being at arms-length, psychologically, we fail to take action. Its complexity is so abstract that thinking about it is immensely difficult, undermining the urgency of doing something about it. But, following Elizabeth Kolbert, Bradley points up that one of the challenges of climate crisis is the **overlapping of geological and human time**, “the conflict between the delayed impact of past emissions, the narrowness of the window for action, and the much slower processes of social and economic change...once we pass a certain threshold, the climate may change rapidly and uncontrollably no matter what we do.”

The inadmission of urgency, then, while evident at a policy level occurs, in part, through our awareness that we are part of the problem. After all, it is anthropogenic, or human activity that has caused climate change. Urgency, then, becomes a problem of communication. (In this way, *The Guardian*, has gone to lengths in its **recent public announcement of changes to their style guide**, where reports climate chaos will now overtly recognise the severity and clearly communicate urgency.)

### **Community not carbon**

Recent scientific research – if not scientists themselves – seems to support protestors across the globe in their demands to radically animate governments to ecological emergency. This is writ large by the global strike on Friday 20 September this year – the largest demonstration for climate action in history – mobilised by Swedish teenager Greta Thunberg in August 2018. And, continues in the international social movement, **Extinction Rebellion**, emerging in the UK in 2018 with local chapters around the world.

But, research is also emerging into the impact of community-led solutions. The contribution of community-based sustainability initiatives (CBSIs) to a transition towards a low-carbon society includes community gardens, solidarity purchasing groups, community-supported agriculture, alternative food networks, recycling, sustainable mobility, and renewable energy, to name the most prominent. These grassroots innovations and transition initiatives serve to address large-scale policy changes as well as bottom-up social practices and behaviour.

To be sure, these initiatives might be attributed to community dissatisfaction with outcomes of international climate agreements. Especially when, as mentioned above, the largest emitters are amongst those not adhering to agreements. Yet, research around **European-**



**based community initiatives** finds that locally-led initiatives can make a significant contribution to reduction and encourage wider change. Not only does this show that community-based transition towards sustainability is possible. But it increases community resilience and social cohesion.

### **Increasing participation**

Augmenting citizen-led transitions is community engagement's increasing participation in climate action. Indeed, community engagement at a local level is critically important to climate action. The 2030 Agenda for sustainable development **embeds public participation** in its Sustainable Development Goals. But, where building resilient infrastructure and encouraging sustainable consumption receives much attention, for instance, in **C40 City** initiatives, the pivotal intersection of climate action and community engagement has fared less exposure. There is a core rationale for increasing the role of community engagement in climate action. Sure, it has its challenges. Particularly around how values-based approach can undermine its purpose. But little is known of what stems from effective frameworks for discussion and community-driven actions towards transitioning to a non-carbon future.

### **What can communities and governments do at a local level?**

Looking at the pitfalls of public participation mentioned above – to rephrase, engage the un-engaged, communicate urgency and the close the “attitude-behaviour gap” – it can be argued that through community engagement activities, local governments effectively engage the public around climate action, overriding the seemingly insurmountable barriers around silence and urgency. It also acts as an antidote to ideas of low-level participation in countries of the biggest polluters and government disregard for international climate agreements.

In the USA, the US Port of San Francisco's Waterfront Resilience Programme envisions collaborative priorities for better preparedness and responsiveness to climate-crisis related risks and challenges around seismic events, flooding, rising sea levels and shoreline erosion. The adaptive planning framework **enables community members to participate** in the management, and resilience-building for the 7.5 miles of bayside shoreline – which houses the region's popular public spaces, a national historic district, businesses, and

maritime, industrial, and residential communities. While the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (USACE) and the Port have collaborated to examine flood risk along the shoreline areas of Bayview/Islais Creek, Mission Bay/Mission Creek, and Embarcadero- the scope, goals, and milestones are, in part, shaped by the community. (The [Waterfront Assets Mapping Exercise](#) invites participants to identify up to three assets on the waterfront on a map and underline their prioritisation; the [Historic Pier Rehabilitation Program Survey](#) asks for community input on shaping new public spaces, while the Embarcadero Seawall Program Goals are open for community comment and feedback.)

Alternately, in the County of San Mateo, the [Climate Ready SMC](#) Collaborative works with community to unpack challenges and risks, develop policies and programs, activate and support community-driven pathways, facilitate community conversations and leadership, and promote dialogue, coordination, and leadership on collaborative action and adaptation. The County invites community ideation for climate change preparedness and provides a mapping exercise to locate vulnerable areas for extreme weather events and related hazards. Participants can also share stories, ideas for events, and apply to partner with the collaborative on engagement activities.

In addition, Canada's sixth-largest City, Mississauga, sought community input in [The Climate Change Project](#). Precipitated by the City's [youth-led declaration of climate change emergency in June this year](#), the project engaged community views around greenhouse reduction strategy bylaws and policies, climate-change resilient infrastructure, and new building technologies. The City is also reviewing pilot projects such as home energy audits and rain garden installations for managing stormwater. Introducing Canada's first comprehensive Climate Change Action Plan (CCAP), following initial research, the City looked at land use, infrastructure vulnerability, clean tech, energy, GHG emissions, and community risk assessments. Here, community outreach delivered over 60 events and engaged over 10,000 community members.

Across the globe, in NSW, Australia, Central Coast Council sought community input into its [Climate Change Policy](#), endorsed earlier this year. Following a preliminary survey in 2018, the Council held a public exhibition and community workshops, with outcomes integrated within wider policy. The Draft Policy addressed the reduction of greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions, Paris Agreement, community initiatives, renewable energy, and the impact of climate change on emergency management around extreme weather events including bushfires, rising sea levels and impacts on biodiversity.

## **Cause and effect**

While it cuts through the swathe of inaction at a federal level, community engagement at a local level can also articulate the cause and effect relationship between climate change and issues such as air, water and other natural resources. Given that air and water quality





are listed as of most concern to communities, community engagement can communicate irreversible risks that climate chaos poses in a tangible way. This can impact the at ‘arms-length’ thinking that obfuscates the urgency of climate chaos competing with seemingly more immediate issues.

A local government engagement showing the effect between climate crisis and water in Newhaven in Victoria, Australia, is using community-centred decision making to explore emission reduction and asset adaptation. Following Westernport Water’s Climate Change Strategy and initial consultations on the Climate Change Mitigation and Adaptation Strategy, the Council addressed renewable energy options at the local, regional, and state levels. It looked at efficiency, targets, and the goal of state net zero emissions by 2050, resulting in a Draft Strategy and Climate Change Pledge.

Alternately, the Greater Cambridge Partnership and the Borough of Kingston upon Thames (also discussed below) have shown the benefits of action (and risks of inaction) in looking at how to tackle congestion and improve air quality. This shows that climate action messaging can talk more about the concrete risks of inaction – and the benefits of action – rather than continue to discuss climate chaos in the abstract with future consequences.

### **Citizen’s assemblies, deliberation and climate action**

In the UK, Citizen Assemblies are gathering pace as a solution to the climate crisis – which places democratic ideas that buttress community engagement at the centre of climate crisis solution. The government announced plans for six select committees of the House of Commons to hold **Citizens’ Assembly on combatting climate change** to achieve the pathway to net-zero carbon emissions.

**Citizen’s assemblies enable inclusive and deliberative decision making** that empowers citizens with decision making around climate – providing potential for meaningful change. (Indeed, for international social movement, Extinction Rebellion, the potential for governments to be led by decisions of **citizen’s assemblies sits equally alongside** rapid decarbonisation and governments’ communicating urgency around climate crisis – particularly if they become legally binding.)

Bringing together random samples of citizens in moderated groups – where numbers vary from a dozen to one hundred – citizen assemblies, or mini-publics, provide people with access to balanced information, competing experts, differing points of view and critical thinking skills to arrive at a considered and agreed-upon recommendation. By exposing participants to information which is wide-reaching and deeply informed, deliberation enables citizens to better engage with policy issues at hand. (Recently demonstrated in recent [citizens' assemblies by the Irish parliament to address abortion laws](#).)

Although questions remain around any legislative power citizen's assemblies might hold, what these assemblies achieve in climate action is a responsiveness to citizens hopes and values that is grounded in tangible concerns. They also help fill the gap between distrusted political elites and cut through the political deadlock of the “false balance debate”. This short circuits polarisation and spiralling into paralysing battles over climate chaos legitimacy – the “what if” or “when”. [As Professor Graham Smith says](#), “citizen assemblies could well help governments kick-start the tough but urgently needed steps to safeguard a healthy and stable world ... If successful, it may well give rise to the type of empowered citizens' assemblies that bring the wisdom of citizens fully to bear on the climate and ecological emergency.”

Climate action assemblies are similarly gathering pace at a local level. Greater Cambridge Citizen's Assembly [Consult Cambs](#), brought together a [team of independent experts](#) supporting ways to address air quality, congestion, and public transport over a series of presentations and panels streamed live on the organisation's social media channels and dedicated online engagement space.<sup>3</sup> Currently under review, the assembly's community-engaged findings will report on how to tackle congestion, improve air quality and provide better public transport in Greater Cambridge. In a similar vein, The Royal Borough of Kingston upon Thames/Kingston Council citizens' assembly to [tackle air quality](#) will be held over four days in November and December this year. Here, Councillor Hilary Gander provides context for the consultation and touches on suggestions for countering poor air quality, personal impact and contribution – and better support for bikes. It also provides a report on the Kingston Air Quality Forum of July 2019, which identified community priorities and mapped air quality suggestions.

## Digital engagement in climate action

Community engagement platforms can show what climate action means to communities and help local governments strategise and direct policy interventions to ensure robust and citizen-centric urban planning, solid waste management, transportation and energy consumption.

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<sup>3</sup> Supported by the UK Government's [Innovation in Democracy Program](#); activities were delivered by the [Sortition Foundation](#) and the [Involve Foundation](#).



As an example, [Inner West Council New South Wales](#), Australia, asked for community submissions to inform their Climate Change Plan, a ten-year vision for the organisation's operations, services and responsibilities to the community. Here, digital engagement worked to illustrate the difference between 'adaptation' and 'mitigation' strategies, and outline risks to the community addressed by the plan. It also introduced thermal hotspot and social vulnerability mapping which will be taken up to understand priorities for green infrastructure to tackle extreme heat events.

The City of Longmont passed their Climate Emergency Resolution on October 8, 2019, setting out intent for action in response to climate change. Online engagement on the Resolution asks the community to stay informed on climate action and issues initiated by the City and invites suggestions on what further can be done. (In addition, community members can apply to join the Climate Task Force, a working group comprised of City staff, residents and experts to deliberate on how the City could address climate change, carbon reduction, and sustainability, with the intention of producing a report within four months of the resolution.) Through an online platform, participants are also invited to submit stories around their personal experiences of climate change and related efforts.

Indeed, including personal efforts to decrease emissions forms part of digital engagement in Halifax Regional Municipality, Canada. Halifax Regional Municipality – which has introduced [a strategy for electric cars](#) and an award-winning Solar City Program – envisions collaborative action on climate change for the next thirty years. And, while the initiative [HalifACT 2050: Acting on Climate Together](#) uses digital engagement to map hazards and provide climate action surveys, community members can also contribute ideas on their personal efforts to decrease emissions.

### **Positive shared experience**

It is irrefutable that the impending dislocations of climate chaos intersect with the already existing crisis around inequality. With 7.7 billion people on earth, a figure that has increased threefold since the 1950s, improving affordability for vulnerable populations becomes a priority as equity-seeking residents and communities will be the most vulnerable to impacts of climate change. [Bill McKibben puts it](#) "The poorest and most vulnerable will pay the highest price." Where local organisations [optimise online engagement in housing affordability](#), climate action initiatives often target groups with capacity to adopt to new



solutions. That is, affluent communities. Making engagement around climate action inclusive is, then, imperative.

But the battle against climate chaos is at once complex and urgent. This is compounded by the fact that, while the goal to reduce GHG emissions might seem definable within a ceiling target of two degrees, emission pathways are not. As Jonathan Franzen put it in the *New Yorker*, “the climate apocalypse is messy”.

The recent editorial in *The Economist’s* ‘*Climate Issue*’ suggests that while we cannot adapt away the effects of climate change: “The further change goes, the less adaptation will be able to offset it ... The damage that climate change will end up doing depends on the human response over the next few decades.”

Locally-led initiatives and community engagement, then, can identify the need for people to find a way to connect to climate action – connecting not only ideas but habitation and the way we live. Community engagement has the opportunity to enable communities and policy-makers to better understand urgent climate action on a macro level and how to relate to its impact on an individual community scale.



## Can deliberation renew democracy in a digital world?

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Democracy is, seemingly, under threat the world over. Diversely labelled “democratic recession” and the “death of democracy” in the extreme, this has also given rise to “**post democracy**,” where parameters determining people’s living conditions are set by entities out of reach of national policy making. Add to this the **waning number of recognised democratic countries** while some apparent democratic countries are undermining rights and liberties that ensure a working democracy. What’s more, public discontent furthers the gap between citizens and political decision makers, themselves widely distrusted by citizens who, in turn, fuel narrow populism and polarised thinking.

With the rapid loss of trust in political decision makers, disillusioned citizens are fatigued by fake news, its **threat to public participation**, and a loss of confidence in processes of electoral representative democracy. Just look to the UK’s Brexit referendum or the 2016 US presidential election to name the most prominent. Indeed, **a recent poll in Canada** suggests that public disconnection from democracy creates a wider risk of unhealthy populism that undermines the values and principles of democracy.

But the legitimacy of democracy depends on a real – and tangible – link between the public and public policies. Enter deliberative democracy. Ideally, this might respond to legitimate ways governments can engage people so they feel more engaged in public decision making beyond voting. But, is this possible in an era of fake news, social media and public discussions among the like-minded? That is, how can we make deliberative democracy practical in the cacophony of self-sorting, information bubbles on social media? But first we need to unpack deliberation.

## What is deliberation?

*“The goal of deliberation is for citizens to determine reflectively not only preferences, but also the reasons that support them.”* Nicole Curato et al, *Dædalus*<sup>1</sup>

At its core, deliberation requires weighing up competing arguments around policies and public decisions in a context of mutually civil – and diverse – discussion. In this way, people themselves can decide on the merit of policy decisions through the provision of solid information. This is essential to democracy. For deliberative processes allow for facilitated social learning. For instance, in mini-publics like citizen’s juries, people are recruited by random sampling to reflect the broader population in terms of age, gender, ethnicity and social class. Here, small groups deliberate with elected representatives in an organised setting. Equally, citizen’s assemblies and deliberative polling bring together random samples of citizens in moderated groups. Where numbers vary from a dozen to one hundred – demonstrated in recent *citizens’ assemblies by the Irish parliament to address abortion laws* – in these mini-publics, people are given access to balanced information and competing experts who field questions from differing points of view in order to arrive at a considered and agreed-upon recommendation. By exposing participants to information which is wide-reaching and deeply informed, deliberation enables citizens to better engage with policy issues at hand. Citizens affected by a decision, then, have the capacity – and opportunity – to deliberate in a public sphere.

Deliberation supports democratic decision making by incorporating a wide range of views and opinions into a focussed discussion. To enable diverse opinion, however, requires both a reflective and respectful environment where participants consider the merits arguments of others. As *Crispin Butteris puts it*, “The core objective of deliberation allows for participants to potentially transform their values and preferences to allow for collective decision making outcome.”

Indeed, a recent commentary in the *Financial Times* suggests that there’s a “case for making democracy more deliberative...among citizens at large”. For deliberation holds a promise to revive the legitimacy found wanting in current democracies, providing a middle ground between the wide mistrust of governments and narrow populist voices borne out of this mistrust.

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<sup>1</sup> Nicole Curato, John S. Dryzek, Selen A. Ercan, Carolyn M. Hendriks & Simon Niemeyer, “*Twelve Key Findings in Deliberative Democracy Research*,” *Dædalus Journal of the American Academy of Arts & Sciences*, Summer 2017.





## How deliberation responds to challenges in an increasingly digital world

### Better Connections, Better Governance

Through the reliance on electoral processes to determine policy, it's well received that current democracies provide weak connections between decision makers and citizens. Deliberative democracy, on the other hand, through reflective processes, envisions better connections between the public's real concerns and how they are governed. This is a far cry from elections interpreting the public preferences where votes are made equivalent to public preferences. Applying deliberative approach to decisions could make better connections between the public's real concerns and how they are governed.

### Responsive to citizens' hopes and values

Deliberation helps fill the gap between distrusted political elites and short circuits polarised thinking that arises from angry populism that fuels polarised thinking. Governments and public decision makers are distrusted, in part, when they seem unresponsive to the public's concerns. Populism stirs up angry "nondeliberative" voices that can be mobilised in plebiscitary campaigns (i.e. Brexit, 2016 US presidential election). Apathy and other forms of non-participation and political alienation are the reverse side of angry populism. With more responsiveness, deliberation works in concert with public values and aspirations.

### Grounded in public concerns

Methods of deliberative democracy are evidence-based which means it is grounded in the values and concerns of citizens. While its practical uptake can be evidenced in deliberative forms of community engagement, deliberation is more evidence-based where recommendations or statements arrived at through a deliberative process are reflective and representative of the wider population. That is, they do not magnify a singular, 'top down' voice, on the one hand, or like-minded voices that loop information bubbles on social media. This ensures citizens receive balanced information and don't rely on election promises to transmit policy into action.

### Renews faith in democracy

Deliberative democracy cuts through group homogeneity and unhealthy polarisation arising from social media, where opinions are formed in a single direction (importantly, this is different to **enclave deliberation, where like-minded voices can enable marginalised groups struggling to find a voice.**) Deliberative groups, like citizens assemblies, where members are made up to represent electorate as a whole, highlight a diversity of views, experiences and knowledge, essential to a healthy democracy .



### **Intimately linked to community engagement**

Like deliberative democracy, **community engagement** envisions a society in which citizens affected by a decision have both the capacity and opportunity to deliberate in a public sphere. That is, citizens can affect political processes on issues they care about.

Community-based deliberation, moreover, enables social cohesion and resilience. Taking communities diverse voices, deliberation can short circuit the discussion among like-minded people on social media that fuels polarised and divisive thinking.

### **Positively responds to digital technology**

It's no surprise that digital technology has changed the way democracy works – to both negative and positive effect. Social media, in part, has negatively shaped public debate, especially where it encourages polarisation and undermines trust in democracy and democratic institutions. Amongst the myriad **benefits of online engagement**, digital engagement targets misinformation and reduces its risks. Through accessibility and transcending geographical limitations, it also promotes participation and democratic literacy. When **facing online deliberative processes, software selection is crucial**, however. Digital engagement platforms provide a forum for people to deliberate, including space for sharing stories, ideas and dialogue. It promotes online communities where, in safe spaces, people are invited to weigh up competing arguments and consider the issues at hand through a reflective process, as technologies contribute positively to democratic processes.



# Online engagement rises to the global affordable housing challenge

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Affordable housing is an intractable problem globally. Housing stress, dwelling prices out-of-step with wages, working poverty, unstable accommodation and severely overcrowded dwellings are just some of the critical problems facing most major cities across the globe. Add to this decades' long unregulated speculative housing and, in some cases like Australia, a lack of federal government involvement, and these problems are more than exacerbated. With swelling population growth and urban expansion, this is not limited to major cities. Charting the changing geography of poverty in the United States over recent years, where smaller metropolitan areas have grown at double pace, the **suburbanisation of poverty** accounts for almost half the total national increase.

On a global scale, price points of dwellings are well beyond household means. In Australia, more than 50 per cent of low income residents are **spending upwards of 50 per cent** on rent while, in the US, more households are renting than at **any other time in 50 years**, leaving people open to vulnerable and unstable accommodation. Alternately, in the last year, **nearly a quarter of Canadians spent more than 30 percent on shelter costs**, revealing more people are living in precarious circumstances. In Vancouver alone, the 2018 Homeless Count found **more than 2,100 people do not have a home**.



## Governments incentivise housing supply

This is not to suggest that governmental policies haven't been introduced. Nor that governments are blinkered to the impacting "housing crisis".

While Australia is yet to action a national housing affordability strategy that might prioritise, finance and implement cultural change, individual states are seemingly addressing the issue. In the state of Victoria, for instance, affordable housing has **recently been enshrined as an explicit aim in the *Planning and Environment Act***. Alternately, in the United States, the governor of California, Gavin Newsom, introduced historically **unprecedented budgetary efforts to incentivise housing production** to tackle the state's widespread housing crisis. This is in the wake of a **controversial bill** allowing high density near transit stops **despite any community objection**. By contrast, Newsom's budget proposed funding for emergency homeless shelters, subsidising developments for low- and middle-income residents and providing grants to cities and counties to instigate housing construction.

But whether buried in planning laws or leading a state wide budgetary promise, when looking at solutions to housing affordability, state governments tackle housing supply. Policy interventions have ranged that from experiments with high-density housing to changing zoning laws primarily to increase supply.

This has been redoubled in proposal measures at Federal levels. Indeed, the UK government has introduced series of **budget measures to boost housing supply** to fix the "broken housing market". Equally, in Australia, the Federal government's **proposal to introduce a scheme to offset housing construction** aims to inject into housing supply. Although not without concern, some government housing initiatives have had positive results – programs such as **encouraging regional policies like, *Move To Work***, in the US. But, in general, tackling housing supply as an antidote to current affordability scarcity has had varying outcomes for community sustainability.

## Housing supply "mathematically impossible"

In fact, the biggest problem isn't overall supply. False arguments like boosting housing supply to fix affordability is, as Jamie Hall **stated in *The Monthly***, "mathematically impossible". This is equally questionable in the context of California's new budgetary promise. As writing in *The Atlantic* in February 2019, **Reihan Salam states**: "There is simply not enough zoned land to reach Newsom's target of 3.5 million new housing units, even if everything went swimmingly." (From now until 2025, Newsom has called for the construction of 3.5 million new housing units, far surpassing the current average of **80,000 new homes per year** over the past decade.) Alternately, the Australian government's introduction of a "social impact investing" discussion paper to increase supply follows a **similar London-based housing scheme criticised for driving up rents** and driving out public housing.



## The affordable housing supply crisis

A 2019 report by research team [Transforming Housing](#) reinforces that the greatest challenge is not overall housing supply. But that price points of dwellings exceed household means. In addition, the actual amount of housing required needs to be not only affordable, but appropriately sized and accessibly located to meet people's needs.

This brings into question planning systems and policies that contribute to rising inequality, such as those in the UK. Here, researchers have explained how [Britain's planning system and tax policy cause the country's housing crisis](#) and contribute to rising inequality. As Daniel Bentley explains in his 2017 [guide to the housing crisis](#): "The challenge, however, is not just to raise total output but to ensure that the right types of housing are delivered and in the places they are needed most."

In Australia, limited crisis accommodation and overflowing public housing wait lists – currently at 200,000 with up to a ten-year waiting list – generate homelessness, in the extreme. Add to this, in just five years, homelessness has grown nationally by 14 per cent (while the state of NSW had the highest growth of over 37 per cent.) With the social housing sector constrained, as Kirsty Muir et al distinguish, we don't have a housing supply crisis but "[an affordable housing supply crisis](#)."

## A crisis in definition

It could be argued that solutions proposed suffer from affordable housing's broad definition. "Housing affordability," as the [Grattan Institute 2018 report](#), *Housing Affordability: Re-imagining the Australian Dream*, puts it, "is a catch-all term for a grab-bag of public concerns linked to rising house prices." Indeed, its common use takes in wide-ranging issues from rental stress – "low income earners struggling to make ends meet" – housing accessibility to services and employment, and "the cultural turn of ever widening wealth inequality between and within generations". Primary to governments' meeting the provision of goals, as *Transforming Housing's* report elucidates, is to "establish a clear and shared definition of 'affordable housing'". The numerous state agencies that are often engaged in the aspects of affordable housing delivery further adds to the diffusion of tangible outcomes (in the state of Victoria alone there are over 12 agencies engaged in and around affordable housing).

## Homelessness and social housing

But can we look at housing affordability without looking at key drivers of homelessness? Financial vulnerability is on a continuum of issues that results in people not having affordable homes. Domestic violence, vulnerable groups, discrimination across rental markets, overcrowding, inadequate dwellings, are just some of the factors that push people into housing insecurity.

One solution has been to support public tenants moving into home ownership. The [Melbourne Apartment Project](#) (MAP) in Australia and [Toronto's Options For Home Schemes](#) in Canada are two such examples that have enabled cross-subsidy schemes that bridge the gap between private developers and social housing. While MAP offers scalable options and has sold 28 out of 34 apartments to social housing tenants, Toronto [has created 6,000 home ownership units in the past 20 years](#). In Europe, where providing adequate affordable housing has been under threat since 1980s public expenditure pressures, privatisation and liberalisation, social landlords, or organisations that own and manages social housing, have further done a lot to reset the balance.

This also shows how a coordinated, national strategy investing in social housing can reduce chronic homelessness and save government money. Finland's 'Housing First' has reduced homelessness by 35% through its scheme, Y-Foundation, Finland's largest non-profit housing provider, which owns 16,500 apartments. Here, however, [basic social infrastructure is not a playground of finance and speculation](#).

## Leading a national strategy through online community engagement

The Canadian government announced its first ever national housing strategy that commits 40 billion over 10 years and includes incentives to build for modest income residents. 'A Place to Call Home' tackles insecure rental tenure and "bad faith evictions" caused by proprietor redevelopments, leaving people caught in housing crisis. To date, The City of Vancouver and the British Columbia provincial government have scaled up a pilot project to deliver 600 dwellings of temporary modular housing built in just over six months. In addition, Vancouver Affordable Housing Agency, [VAHA](#), has in train over two thousand below-market housing options.

In its inception, the government sought community input to ask for feedback at a national level on how to reduce chronic homelessness. The [Advisory Committee on Homelessness](#), moreover, [sought views from all Canadians](#) on how to reduce homelessness through an online engagement process, the feedback from which is to be released in an upcoming report.

## Community engagement approached to housing affordability

Many local governments and councils, municipalities and provinces have looked to community input in meeting housing needs and reducing homelessness. Where these local organisations optimise online engagement, they have adapted policy through dynamically engaging communities through





consultation. This includes innovative approaches such as Colorado's City of Arvada using a photo survey as part of online engagement around affordable housing options, and Boulder's newly formed Housing Advisory Board's recent community brainstorm.

Putting community engagement first in finding solutions, Canadian provinces have actively sought community input. [Let's Talk Kamloops](#) online engagement site for City of Kamloops uses online engagement to gather feedback and ideas from residents and community members on proposed amendment to Zoning Bylaw to enable additional suites in residential areas of the city. The suites are a tangible form of affordable rental housing for tenants and increase density by using existing social and urban infrastructure. [Let's Talk Housing BC](#), British Columbia Housing's online engagement site, facilitates residents' contribution to housing issues including the transfer of land for redevelopment, supporting housing for those at risk of homelessness, and temporary modular homes.

The City of Spruce Grove, Alberta, is working to create a five-year strategy to reduce poverty and homelessness, meeting a [desire within the community to engage and be a part of the solution](#). Concluded earlier this year, this process involved reviewing and researching best practices, data gathering, and engaging with community members to evolve a strategy that is created by community members and supports collective action and collaboration in finding sustainable solutions.

In the US, the Mountain town of Truckee, California, is [updating their general plan](#) with affordable housing as one of the major issues on the plan. (Housing is one of five pillars of the plan.) Using online engagement, the town is actively seeking community input on housing issues and potential solutions, including housing types that are sustainable into the future.

Alternately, local governments in Australia also sought community stories from and of vulnerable peoples. South Brisbane PHN consulted communities through an [online engagement portal on Homelessness](#) – or a lack of a regular place of accommodation – to address and prioritise major issues impacting health. The Melbourne council, the City of Port Phillip similarly sought community feedback on the [Homelessness Action Strategy 2015-2020](#) to work alongside support agencies to record the number of people turned away from their services and can't be assisted due to lack of available crisis accommodation. Equally, one of the first local governments to introduce a Homelessness Policy in 2015, New South Wales Tweed Shire Council's [Draft Homelessness Policy](#) consulted communities and residents to provide input on policy reviews. Indeed, community response to online engagement has suggested demonstrable impact. In 2018,

Queensland's [Department of Housing and Public Works](#) signed up tens of thousands of residents and community members to its online engagement portal on housing reform to improve renting conditions in Queensland.

### **Housing communities through social infrastructure**

But the salient point here is that, rather than a suggesting housing supply is one-fix solution, through an online community engagement approach, local governments, councils, municipalities and provinces are taking up the mantle of an actionable national strategy. This approach crucially takes into account social infrastructure, essential to the [changing landscape of contemporary cities](#) and increasing urbanisation.

As early as 2003, a [report by the Brookings Institute](#) examined the effectiveness of seven decades of affordable housing strategies, highlighting seven basic goals of housing affordability. While this covered supply, affordability and accessibility, equally crucial were promoting racial and economic diversity in residential neighbourhoods, strengthening families and linking housing with essential supportive services to provide and promote balanced metropolitan growth.

An online community engagement approach by local organisations combats governments' narrow set of objectives, such as the number of dwellings created. For this narrow criteria doesn't reflect the array of community needs, reflections, ideas and input into housing issues that impact their communities and neighbourhoods, as well as enabling an evaluation of the effectiveness of past, present and future affordable housing programs and policies.

Community engaged approaches to housing affordability, it would seem to me, might enable federal, state and local leaders to better align community outcomes they themselves want to achieve with housing policy approaches they adopt.



## Why Canada's Cannabis Act is a green-field opportunity for online engagement

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Canada is the **first G7 country** – and only second in the world – to fully legalise cannabis consumption. Regulating the use and sale of recreational marijuana, the briefly named Cannabis Act, was introduced in **April 2017** and came into effect 17 October this year, providing a stringent legal **framework** for use, possession, production, and distribution of marijuana.

Canada is no shrinking violet when it comes to campaigning or seeking out benefits of marijuana. As early as 2001, it was the **first country to sanction the medical use of marijuana**. No doubt, this recent landmark legislation will continue growing innovations beyond the narrow perception of the plant – what I'd loosely call 'Cannabis scholarship', that is, research that explores social, genetic and scientific questions around its use and usefulness. Alternately, it has already propagated university courses across the country from **cannabis training courses** to its **commercial production and business**, a groundswell, as **recently noted in the New York Times**, that has also produced the need for full-time "Cannabis journalists".

## **Municipalities exert greater role in regulations**

Ultimately, this landmark decision marks the introduction of recreational marijuana into the Canadian mainstream. Cannabis legislation around the world walks in the shadow of such revolution – although **several jurisdictions** have now legalised cannabis, including Washington and Colorado in the United States, Uruguay and Catalonia, while the **New Zealand government has flagged a referendum** to become the first nation in the Asia-Pacific region with **states in Australia also pushing for reform**.

But this broad skeletal legislation has also given Canada's municipalities a greater role in its retail and regulation. The Canadian government is giving Canada's 13 provinces and territories their say, with municipalities setting their own rules regarding where cannabis can be sold and consumed. In doing this, in the lead up to the once-only opt-out of recreational cannabis retail stores, local municipalities have been cultivating online engagement consultations. While the ground is shifting as the provinces establish regulations for new laws, online engagement has proved pivotal in informing communities and soliciting residents input about the logistical future of recreational cannabis retail before the upcoming deadline of January 22, 2019.

## **Ontario's cannabis licence act**

In October 2018, Ontario's **Cannabis Licence Act** released its regulations, which came into effect on November 17 of that year. Rules around where and how cannabis is consumed or sold differ across Canada's provinces and territories. Following wide consultations with stakeholders and residents, Ontario has enacted further regulations that address retail, distribution and the protection of youth and communities. These laws will guide a closely controlled private retail scheme expected to roll-out in April 2019.

But first, Ontario's local governments are required to let the Canadian government know where they stand on cannabis retail locations within their boundaries, and, through public engagement, are seeking community input to inform their decisions.

## **Ontario's private retail model**

Ontario plans to allow privately owned brick-and-mortar – read, 'physical' – retail stores to launch in Spring of 2019. Until then, the only legal way to purchase recreational cannabis is via the Ontario Cannabis Store website. Retail operators and outlets will be licensed by the **Alcohol and Gaming Commission of Ontario** (AGCO), and supplied solely by the Ontario Cannabis Retail Corporation.

The private retail model will support local governments to work with potential store owners. The new regulations established by the Ontario government also speak to various aspects





of the private retail system. For instance, there are measures to maintain distance buffers between stores and schools and to counter illegal markets.

Within new regulations, municipalities currently have the opportunity to decide on allowing, or restricting, the establishment of cannabis retail stores. Councils choosing to opt out will have to send in their municipal resolutions to the AGCO. While opting out doesn't forego allowing stores at a later date, those opting in cannot reverse their decision after the January deadline.

### **Growing conversations with online engagement**

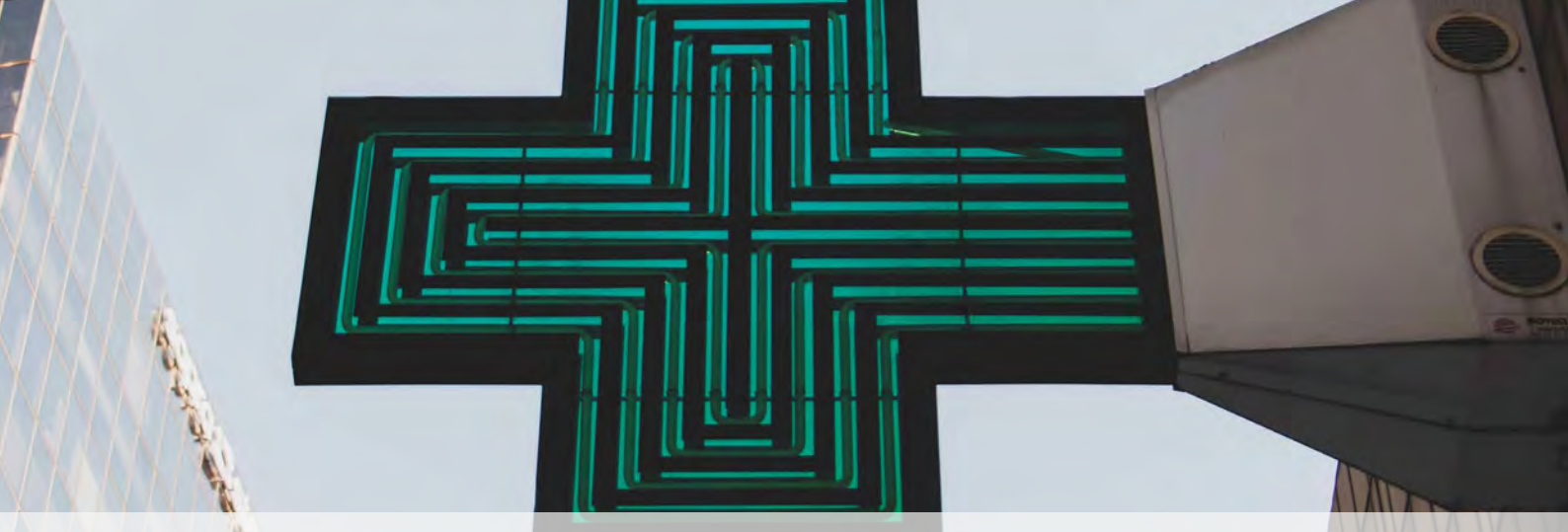
Coupling the volatility of an issue like cannabis with the requirement that local municipalities engage their communities presents fertile ground for online community participation. With a strict regulatory framework in place, municipal governments are using online engagement to find out how the community feels about the way ahead and reach a decision around whether to opt out of establishing recreational use retail stores.

To date, dedicated online engagement is activating vital conversations in several Ontario municipalities. Indeed, seven municipalities<sup>1</sup> are currently using online engagement to gather resident views and feedback regarding logistics such as proposed locations, and also views on thornier issues such as cannabis use and enforcement and whether, in fact, municipalities should allow private recreational cannabis stores. Online engagement's broad reach and accessibility has further dovetailed with city support of public participation. Indeed, Sarnia's Mayor, **Mike Bradley, recently reported** "It's something I deeply believe in – public engagement."

But given the contentiousness of the issue, the stakes around substance policies are paramount for decision makers and community alike. It goes without saying that for Ontario residents and municipal governments reflecting on the choice to host cannabis

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<sup>1</sup> Seven Ontario municipalities utilised online engagement to inform and sound out their communities on the new regulations: City of Oshawa; City of Sarnia; City of Mississauga; Township of Huron-Kinloss; Municipality of Grey Highlands; Town of Amherstburg; City of Greater Sudbury.



retail stores, there are various social, economic, and administrative considerations to be made. But making these conversations public can also open up to negative polarisation and also raises concerns around privacy. Taking the conversation online in a controlled and monitored environment, however, municipalities are equally managing such risk while seizing the opportunity to speak directly to their community and moving beyond a narrow, vociferous minority. They are also readily able to inform communities on new regulations and listen to feedback, providing measurable impact involving residents in decision making.

While online engagement can provide a convenient – and accessible – space for residents to support a meaningful conversation, it is noticeably far removed from the noise and limitations of social media. Given this counterpoint, growing online engagement not only provides municipalities an opportunity to build trust through transparency (from closed, question and answer type consultations to encouraging open conversations and dialogue, for instance). But it might also move conversations beyond the political fray of the legalisation and mainstreaming of marijuana with far-reaching effects for everyone involved.



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