

Citizen Engagement: The Overarching Solution

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Experts know the overarching solution to all of the big problems we face. You can find it in the last 10 pages of any book on a large-scale problem such as climate change or sustainable cities or childcare or food security. In the last chapter every author echoes every other. The solution is more citizen engagement.

So how do we increase citizen engagement? Good question, because at this point virtually every author just ends the book. Not even a hint about how to do citizen engagement. If this is the ultimate solution, a few suggestions would be helpful since the number of citizens regularly involved in public affairs is less than 10 per cent.

How strange we see nothing amiss in detailing every aspect of big problems, but leave solutions undefined. Why become aware of the mess, if we can't do anything about it? Maybe we assume that any large-scale problem automatically lacks any clear way forward. Or maybe large problems are paralyzing and that's all there is to it. But there could be a purpose to the silence around the solution of citizen engagement.

All societies are biased in favour of stability. Without this bias, the inventiveness that constructed a society in the first place would go on to create something else. But a bias for stability has a downside; it gets in the way of making changes when changes are necessary. If experts see citizen engagement as the ultimate problem-solving mechanism; it is unavoidably the ultimate change mechanism. It is this threat of change that has blockaded citizen involvement, and produced a resilient system of social and political institutions that appear to respond to demands for change, without changing much at all. Together they make a "rubber room" from which escape is difficult.

Still, we feel fundamental change is necessary, because so much is not as it should be.

... A study conducted in the U.S. by the National Committee for Responsive Philanthropy this year showed that \$1 invested in the community saw a return in benefits of between \$89 and \$157. Money invested in citizens' organizations is multiplied by the volunteer effort it brings forth.

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