

# Consensus Conference

Engagement range	Inform/Consult/Partnership
Difficulty level	Medium to hard (reasonable level of skill in communication, media public event organising)
Cost	Medium (\$1,000 - \$10,000) to High (over \$10,000)
When might you use it	To showcase a product, plan, policy To discover community issues To communicate an issue To develop community capacity To develop action plan
Number of people required to help to organise	A team of people may be required (3 - 12)
Size of audience	Large (over 30)
Time to organise	Medium (six weeks to six months) to long (6 -12 months)
Issues/resources to think about	Publicity; Venue/ Furniture; Catering; Moderator/facilitator/Expert; Presenters fees (in volunteer organisations, presenters may not ask for fees); Staffing; Overhead projectors; Data projector/Video/ screen; Audio and visual recording and Amplification; Artists; Photographer; Props for working in groups (pens, paper, pins, etc.); Children's requirements
Innovation level	Medium to High

## Description

A consensus conference is a public meeting, which allows ordinary citizens to be involved in assessing an issue or proposal (traditionally, this has been used in the assessment of technology). The conference is a dialogue between experts and citizens. It is open to the public and the media.

Developed in Denmark, there it is usually attended by members of the Danish Parliament. The citizen panel plays the leading role, formulating questions to be taken up at the conference, and participating in the selection of experts to answer them.

The panel has two weekends for this preparation. The expert panel is selected in a way that ensures that essential opposing views and professional conflicts can emerge and be discussed at the conference. An advisory/planning committee has the overall responsibility of making sure that all rules of a democratic, fair and transparent process have been followed.

Consensus conferences have mostly been used where the topic being investigated concerns management, science or technology. They require a strict adherence to the rules of implementation to be successful. Where members of the community feel their views go unheard, the consensus conference offers an exciting participatory technique for democratic participation.

## Objective

- To give members of the community a chance to have their say on community issues, to increase their knowledge of and ability to participate in such a discussion, and to come to one position statement that all participants can 'own'.

## Desired Outcome

- A position statement that reflects the joint decision(s) of all participants on an issue or proposal.

## Uses/Strengths

- Assists in the facilitation of public debate from a range of perspectives.
- Empowers lay people to develop an informed understanding and make some contribution to the development of policy on a sensitive topic.
- Demonstrates a plurality of views on issues.
- Bridges the gap between experts and lay people.
- Can develop new knowledge.

## Special Considerations/Weaknesses

- High costs for set up and recruitment of participants and staging the event.
- The conference would run for a two – four day period and therefore resources will be costly.
- The process of panellist selection can be difficult. Stakeholders' analysis must be undertaken to predetermine who are the relevant groups. This will ensure that representation from the relevant groups is achieved.
- Need to draw citizens for panels that are representative and from a wide range of backgrounds rather than members of the community who are usually present in participatory processes.
- Strict adherence to the rules of implementation is required for the conference to be successful.
- The formal nature of the tool can restrict impartiality.
- Rapid production of reports and findings is required.
- Choice of an effective facilitator is critical to the success of the conference.

## Step by Step Guide

Select an advisory/planning committee to have the overall responsibility of making sure that all rules of a democratic, fair and transparent process have been followed. The committees should then:

1. Organise a public meeting and advertise the venue, time and topic to the public, experts in the field to be discussed, the media and appropriate decision-making bodies.
2. Select participants for the citizen panel, ensuring a representative sample of the geographic area and/ or relevant community groups (about 14 people).
3. Hire a professional facilitator to work with the citizen panel during its preparation.
4. Book suitable venues for the citizen panel to meet over two weekends to work with a facilitator to formulate the questions to be taken up at the conference, and to participate in the selection of experts to answer them.
5. With the help of the citizen panel, select the expert panel in a way that ensures that essential opposing views and professional conflicts can emerge and be discussed at the conference. Good experts are not only knowledgeable but also open minded and good communicators with an over-view of their field.
6. Hold a formal conference (two-four days) at which:
  - 6.1 Panellists hear experts' responses to questions.
  - 6.2 After hearing these responses, panellists can ask follow up questions.
  - 6.3 The audience is given opportunity to ask questions.
  - 6.4 The panel deliberates and prepares a position statement to achieve consensus on the issue.
  - 6.5 Panellists present outcomes
  - 6.6 Planning committee prepares a report of the outcomes and distributes to panellists, media and decision making bodies.