

# Sector Connector

## Evaluating empowerment



**Verne Ivars Krastins**  
BSc (Hons), Fellow LGPro

If you're a user of the IAP2 Public Participation Spectrum\*, you probably love it.

It's a participation building five-step program, starting with the mundane 'inform', progressing through 'consult- involve- collaborate' and ending in the visionary 'empower', and is a great way to think things through. It helps define your public participation goals, what you promise those participants, and acts as a framework to slot in appropriate techniques.

This can nurture a spirit of partnership between decision masters and their publics, and even make better decisions to the extent that their intent can be modified along the way.

These are good reasons to love the Spectrum, but there are a couple of aspects I find unsettling. The first is the notion of 'empowerment'.

To me, empowerment is a kind of handing over, in this case handing over the decision. Examples of empowerment in the Spectrum's sense include 'citizen juries' and delegated decision making. Linguistically, these may be empowerment, but to what degree are the publics given power? Aren't they really, and in practice, ways to collaborate?

The Spectrum seems more a tool to strengthen or improve policies, not give the public power over them. I think only elections do that. We could call a spade a spade and acknowledge the Spectrum's political purpose as much as we do its value as a consistent way to harness public intelligence on a topic.

The second point wonders why evaluation isn't explicit in the model.

I'm sure most would agree that there is no process, whether for decision making or some other purpose, which will not benefit from evaluation. Just ticking engagement and consultation boxes isn't sufficient. I'd be asking deeper questions such as:

- Did we make better decisions, or learn how to improve decision making?
- Was this the right model to use? Could we have done it another way?
- Did the participating public feel empowered, and if so, who did not?

Now, I'm not suggesting we move to some other methodology. Even with its political undertones, at least 80 per cent is fantastic for the reasons we began with.

But if ever the model was reimagined, you might want to add a sixth dimension to the sequence, namely evaluation, or even keep it to five by substituting terms – evaluation for empowerment.

The concept of empowerment needn't be lost, just made to mean what we really mean, that it's another way to collaborate, to include the public in deliberations and make decisions together.

This wouldn't diminish the Spectrum's value either, quite the contrary. We would be acknowledging the practical limitations of empowerment, and add evaluation's feedback loop in the interests of making it better. ■

\* [www.iap2.org.au](http://www.iap2.org.au)

