On the Menu: Participatory Futures

40:33

**Laura Ferris** 00:04

Thanks very much everyone for joining us today. My name is Laura, I work on the Ofwat Innovation Fund at Nesta Challenges. And on behalf of myself and everyone at the rest of the Ofwat Innovation Fund, we're really excited to welcome you to the very first On the Menu session. So today, I just like to start by kind of taking you through a quick bit of background on what the On the Menu series is itself. And then I'll introduce you to today's speaker, Laurie Smith, who I'll then hand over to, to do the actually exciting and interesting part of leading you through the event today. So the On the Menu series is a set of free, informal kind of lunchtime learning events launched by the Ofwat Innovation Fund, with the aim to showcase kind of new technologies and innovation methods and hosting discussions on those about how they could be applied to the water sector. So today's event in particular focuses on exploring participatory futures, which is a range of techniques for involving citizens, customers and other stakeholders in exploring and shaping possible futures. So encouraging kind of long-term thinking, and ensuring that our innovation efforts are as effective as they can be, and respond in the best way possible to emerging needs. So how today's session is going to be split is that we'll have a bit of a talk from Laurie for around 30 minutes. And then there'll be some time for kind of Q&A towards the end. So please do submit your questions as we go along through the presentation. And we'll be sure to get to those towards the end. So we're super excited for this session to be led by Laurie Smith, who is the Senior Foresight Lead from Nesta's Discovery Hub. And I'm going to hand over to him in just a second to get us kick started and kind of introduce what he does as well. Just before that quick reminder that we are recording today's session. And yeah, so I hope you really enjoy it. And without further ado, Laurie, please take it away.

**Laurie Smith** 01:49

Thank you very much, Laura. So my name is Laurie Smith, and I lead on foresight research at Nesta and Nesta as you might be aware is an innovation agency based in the UK. I think the most important takeaway from my talk is that mass involvement in shaping the future to help solve complex problems like those faced by the water sector. Go on to the next slide, please. So what I'm going to cover today is a description of what I mean by participatory futures. Key roles participatory futures exercises can play within strategy, decision-making and policy-making. Some examples of where this happens, and a few tips should you decide to use participatory futures yourself. We can then try a quick participatory futures exercise to give a flavor of this way of working. After that, we'll have time for some Q&A, we discuss how participatory futures or methods might be applied to your work. Now before I start in earnest, I'd like to credit my co-authors Kathy Peach, John Sweeney and Jose Ramos, as this research is very much been a team effort. I'd also like to flag that much of what I'm saying about participatory futures is true for foresight and futures generally. Finally, I'm also aware that I'm speaking to an audience who are likely to have quite varied levels of experience in this field. So I've therefore pitched the presentation towards those with less experience of futures, as I thought it better to have everyone follow and a few people go over old ground rather than have not so many people follow for the benefit of a few. But first a quiz. In the dim and distant past, before COVID-19 lockdown, Nesta commissioned a survey of what the British public thought about innovation in the future. And I'd like to see whether you can guess their answers. So I'm going to present you with three questions. For each, I'd like you to guess the answer, given by a representative sample of the British public, and maybe put some guesses in the chat. So if you go the next slide and our first question. The first question is, what proportion of the UK population feel uncertain about the future? Is it A) 62%? B) 54%, or C) 40%? Do we have any guesses? I've only got a very small version of the chat. So I can't see everyone's guesses coming up. But, for those who guessed, it's 62%, A. So we go to the next slide. The next question is, what proportion of the UK population feel the world is changing too quickly? Is it A) 71% B) 53% Or C) 39%? So the answer is B, 53%. Go to the next slide. Our next question is, what proportion of the UK population feels positive about the long-term future? Is the answer A) 69%, B) 55% or C) 40%? See some Cs and the Cs are right, it's only 40%. So for those who are interested, all the details can be found in the Nesta report "Is the UK getting innovation right?" If we go to the next slide, I think it'll show that. And to my mind, the takeaways are that even before COVID-19, people were feeling uncertain, negative about the future, which many think is changing too quickly. So if you go to the next slide. So what can be done when citizens increasingly see the future as something to be afraid of and want to take refuge in the past? We at Nesta think part of the solution lies in participatory futures, which are a range of approaches for involving citizens in exploring or shaping potential futures. These aim to democratise and encourage long-term thinking, inform collective actions in the present. We're most interested in those participatory futures exercises that go beyond dry traditional workshops and surveys, and harness digital technologies, and involve new players like artists, game developers, designers. Examples of this include GhostFood, which is a food truck from the future that allows the public to smell foods that might be lost to climate change. The groundbreaking massive multiplayer game World Without Oil, and the interactive art exhibition Time Portals in Finsbury Park, London. Go to the next slide, please.

**Laurie Smith** 06:35

So what value can participatory futures add to decision-making, strategy, policy and the water sector? Well, delivering public value is increasingly complex for governments and organisations facing an array of challenges from climate change to social care. Today's leaders will need to decide on actions now that may only deliver benefits in the long-term, and possibly even deliver some pain in the short-term. Not only will these challenges require new ways of managing public investment, but also require new ways to have conversations with the public about desired destinations, the route map to get there, and the trade offs they're willing to accept. These challenges become more acute when institutions and organisations alone do not have sufficient power or knowledge to influence the changes they wish to see in the communities or across society. The goal instead must become one of building constituencies for long-term change. Traditional public engagement activities in strategy consultation processes are fine as a snapshot of what people think. They aren't especially good at helping to create movements for change or for shifting fundamental behaviours. While important information can be extracted from them, these activities rarely leave participants feeling that their perception or agency has been altered in any significant way. Participatory futures can act as input into more traditional structure and decision-making processes. Enhancing the ability of institutions and organisations to produce public value in conditions of long-term uncertainty can also act as a social process, helping to unleash the intelligence of citizens and unlock the assets of communities in creative and potent ways. One of the keys success is the ability to help people separate diagnosis of how the world is changing for prescription of a solution. When this fails to happen, decision-making can often be paralysed or fuzzy. We think about the different roles of participatory futures under the following five headings that roughly correspond to the sorts of problems these techniques can help tackle. Creating purpose, charting pathways, acting together, mapping horizons, and testing ideas. Now if you go to the next slide, please. So I'll start with creating purpose. Participatory futures can be used to develop a sense of meaning and direction. These activities explore values, needs and aspirations of citizens, they lead to a vision of a preferred future. They can also involve examining and reframing deep-seated cultural organisational assumptions. Go to the next slide, please. Now, one example of this was Australia 2020. On a weekend in late April 2008, more than 1000 Australians responded to an invitation the then Prime Minister, the Honorable Kevin Rudd, and came to Parliament House in Canberra, the Australia 2020 summit. The challenge was to help shape a long-term strategy for the nation's future. The people who attended came from diverse backgrounds, some eminent in a specialised field, others ordinary Australians. Among them were farmers, scientists, health professionals, artists and actors, community leaders and lawyers. They came together to talk about 10 major policy challenges facing the country, including water. The Australia 2020 event showed some of the advantages of bringing a wide range of participants into a conversation about the future. And situates the end date far enough into the future so that people don't act defensively in relation to their interests. Can we go to the next slide, please. Another way participatory futures can be used is to help create high level strategies and socially acceptable pathways for desired change. They often involve citizens in generating novel ideas to realise a vision or collaboratively setting priorities and milestones. Go to the next slide please. Seeds of Good Anthropocenes is an example of this. It's an effort to chart the seeds of pathways towards a sustainable future. The project features an open global online map that allows anyone with access to contribute towards a good anthropocene. Examples relevant to the water sector include trans-boundary water management in the Middle East, and common stewardship of water resources in the American Great Lakes. It aims to counter dystopian images of the future by showcasing realistic and optimistic images that can guide action strategy. The projects involved hundreds of people in workshops around the world and have helped pioneer a new bottom up scenarios methodology. Go to the next slide, please.

**Laurie Smith** 11:17

Participatory futures can also be used in acting together. So as a process to mobilise collaborative action and distribute innovation across a community to realise a desired future. This might involve supporting citizens and a wider range of organisations to initiate and drive social innovations, community enterprises or change campaigns. Go to the next slide, please. One instance of this was a transition management process in Ghent, which aimed to address a major sustainability challenges. The approach saw participants learn by doing and showed how citizens could be signposts of change building enthusiasm and driving more public participation. 100 highly motivated people attended a launch event and joined working groups, which included people from various backgrounds develop ideas like a project to use sewage water to produce heat, biogas, nutrients and clean water, and also a blue economy initiative. Next slide, please. Participatory futures can be used to deepen awareness of changes on medium and long-term horizons. These activities involve citizens in identifying signals of change, emerging issues, and the factors driving them. They can also involve exploration of different ways these changes may play out, and the potential impacts through the creation or use of alternative scenarios. Go to the next slide, please. One example is the future of water timeline from Imperial College. This involved researching weak signals across social, environmental, economic, technological and political domains. Events and ideas are then organised into five streams that flow from the present into probable and possible futures. The visualisation aims to create a one-page graphical view of the future of water in the UK, and its potential trajectories of flow. The authors hope that people can use the timeline to drive fresh thinking on the future of water, and to improve the way we might engage, interact and consume this vital resource in the years to come. Strictly speaking, to my knowledge, I don't know if the project was actually that participatory in its method. But to my mind, the output is more engaging than your typical dense report. So that there's a participatory element in there. The next slide, please. And finally, participatory futures can be used to generate feedback and learning about a specific idea of the future, a scenario, or a prototype. This can produce novel insights as citizens interact with scaled experiments. They enable people to interrogate the desirability of that future, to stress-test it, and consider potential unintended consequences. Next slide, please. As part of an initiative to understand how climate change can and might impact the Hawaiian Islands, the state office planning, planning on the islands reached out to the Hawaii Research Center for Future Studies to create scenarios for 2050 and then 2060. As often happens, workshops were organised but this was no ordinary event. Taking a participatory approach four rooms of Waikiki Marriott Hotel were turned into unique experiences from alternative futures. When you walked into one of the rooms, you were in 2060. In one room, you could listen to a quarterly report from a multinational CEO, negotiating the purchase of one of the islands. In another, you sat on the floor and had to work out how you're going to feed everyone in the largest of the eight islands. Water was one of the things discussed. As a result of the event, in July 2012, Act 286 was signed into law. It encourages collaboration and cooperation toward the mitigation of climate change and directly mentions protecting against the loss of life, land and property for future generations. Next slide, please.

**Laurie Smith** 15:13

So let's round off the presentation with a few tips if you're planning to use participatory futures methods yourself. First, start with a problem you want to solve. Too often, people who aspire to use futures fall in love with a particular method that might not be suitable for the problem they're trying to solve. We hope that the framework that I've just outlined can help others better frame and think about the problem and thereby identify a suitable method. Second, identify a dedicated champion, secure senior buy in and make the business case. Participatory futures work is often experiential. So where possible bring leaders on the journey with you. Ensure there's a clear route to impact from the start. Futures thinking should also be integrated within the day to day work of your organisation. Next find and involve the unusual suspects and work with existing bottom up movements. Too often, people seek out others who think like them, this can lead to blind spots. Of particular importance is engaging hard to reach groups, those without access to the internet or say rough sleepers. Participatory futures should also take account the constraints on people's lives such as childcare, shift work, or limited access to public transport. What is more, many compelling examples of participatory futures are driven from the bottom up by existing movements such as Reclaim the Streets or maybe a few years ago anyway Burning Man. Next, ensure engagement is genuine and manage expectations. Whilst we're enthusiastic about the potential of participatory futures, there's no single project or process to solve everything. Creating a sense of hope about the future necessitates. Be clear about what comes after participatory futures engagement, who is responsible for next steps and stages and how it will or will not be using social change, policy or processes. You'd also create shared purpose and check along the way. It's easy to create a sense of purpose for a project with a small room of initiators. This purpose may not be shared with the wider community. Find a way to test the purpose with them by holding an open conversation. We also use mixed methods. Many of the successful participatory futures case studies I described use combinations of participatory futures methods. While we can imagine circumstances in which a single method might be suitable, the advantages of a range of approaches is the strengths of one method can compensate the weaknesses of another. Finally, sustain momentum and evaluate. Participatory futures are often complex and can evolve. The overall purpose and outcomes of a project can shift over time. It's therefore essential to check all the way and update not just outputs, but also methods and means of evaluating impact. It's also important for the project to offer people avenues for taking next steps and for the work to be evaluated. This can be done with dedicated resources to coordinate and support these next steps. More open call to action for people take greater ownership and accountability. I should flag that participatory futures is often not well evaluated, or even evaluated at all. So, to summarise, overcoming the complex challenges we face to create positive futures for people and the planet won't happen unless we democratise futures thinking. Participatory futures provides one means to do so. So that's the end of my presentation, we'll get to Q&A in a bit. But I thought it might be fun to actually try out a little bit of a participatory futures exercise to give you a sort of flavour of the methods. And for this we're going to use a great participatory futures tool called Moral Machine which some of you might have encountered before. It's an online game that was launched in 2016. Now, Moral Machine isn't directly relevant to the water sector. However, what it does do is offer a quick, easy to use interactive example of participatory futures so you can get some hands on experience. So what it does is present players with scenarios about car accidents, with an emphasis on choices about who to save, humans or animals, men or women or young or old people. If you go to the next slide. I think I've got a link to the slide afterwards. Yeah, that again.

**Laurie Smith** 19:36

There's a link to the Moral Machine there. So at the moment responsibility for design and regulation of algorithms largely sits in an ambiguous space between the company's designers and the policymakers tasks for regulating. Moral Machine aims to bridge this gap. Nearly 40 million people from over 150 countries actively participate in the game and express their preferences. Voices from diverse socio-economic backgrounds are elicited and culture to clear effect on how participants make decisions. The implications of the game go beyond self-driving cars and they stem towards any and all automated and algorithmically enhanced decision making systems, shining a light on how our values can and might drive our technologies rather than the other way around. So as I said get started. First go to the Moral Machine website, maybe if one of my fellow organisers can post that link in the chat if it isn't there already. And that'll help people go to that. So essentially, there are three ways of engaging with Moral Machine but we're going to use the first, judging. For this, you're presented with a random moral dilemma that a machine is facing, for example, who a self-driving car does or does not save in an accident. The car can sense passengers within it, and pedestrians ahead of it. The car also detects if the brakes have failed. This leaves two options, keep going and hit the pedestrians ahead of it, or swerve and hit the pedestrians in the other lane. In some scenarios, the car has passengers. In those cases, one or two of the lanes has a barrier across the across the car can crash into killing the passengers. One or two pedestrian crossings may also indicate whether or not it's legal for pedestrians to be crossing the road. Green signals indicate they can, red signals indicate they cannot. Essentially, it's a more complex version of the famous trolley problem in philosophy. You're outside the scenario watching from above and control the car. Nothing will happen to you whatever the outcome. You express your choice by clicking on one of the two scenarios. In each of the scenarios the outcome for different pedestrians or passengers is indicated by a skull for death, a medical cross for injury, or a question mark if the outcome is uncertain. You will proceed from scenario to scenario by selecting the outcome you feel is most acceptable to you. This can be done by clicking the outcome of your choice, which will be highlighted when you hover the cursor over it. A button below each outcome will let you toggle and display the text summary of that outcome. A count in the top right will let you know your progress through the scenarios. When you're finished, you'll be presented with a summary of your responses compared to those of others. To play, click on the red button entitled "start judging". That can be found on the Moral Machine homepage by often by scrolling down a bit. The instructions that I just went through can also be found by the view instructions button on the website. I'll leave you to play that for say 10 minutes and then perhaps we can come back together for Q&A.

**Laurie Smith** 27:08

So sort of five minutes through of this sort of 10 minutes. I can't actually see everyone so it's really hard to tell whether people have finished playing the game or are still loving it so indicate in the chat if you want me to continue otherwise I'll leave it for another five minutes or so.

**Laurie Smith** 29:07

Should I bring us back together? I didn't know there's a scenario where a cat drove a car. There's so many different permutations. So I think you're chairing now Rhys so, you can continue to play the game in the background. So, over to you Rhys.

**Rhys Herriott** 29:21

Cool, thank you, Laurie. That was fascinating and slightly, slightly concerning running through some of those scenarios. Although I didn't get the example with the cat driving the car. So if any questions came to mind for Laurie, please drop those into the Q&A as we continue. To start us off Laurie, I was wondering if, I'm hopeful that following your talk, there's a few people on this call who are feeling pretty inspired to go and start trying to roll out some of these methods in their organisation or like Clive flagged in the chat, may have realised that they're already sort of doing this a little bit already. And there maybe opportunities to build on it a little bit more. So I wonder Laurie is there, what should be the next steps for someone who wants to try and roll this out in their organisation? Are there any resources they should be reading up on? Where can they start?

**Laurie Smith** 30:20

Well, at the risk of self-promoting, I suppose a good starting point is, we did a report called "Our Futures: By the people, for the people", which is on the Nesta website. And that provides sort of an overview of what participatory futures is, a whole load of case studies, and a way of sort of a framework for organising and thinking about the different types of participatory futures one can follow. So that's, that's one resource, of course, I went in a self-interested way plug. A second one is, you have a collaborator of ours. There's something called Action Foresigh, and then a "Global Swarm", which are a commercial outfit that are international, I think their main base might be Australia, but they're international. And they do various participatory futures work. They also do a participatory futures game that we did with them, which is open source, again, that's available on their website and on the Nesta website. So that's ways of sort of thinking. So it's a structure essentially, it's a game, it's a structured way of coming up with participatory futures exercises. So there are two sort of generic resources on participatory futures specifically. Now, in fact, there's much less on participatory futures as a field as a whole. So what there is, there's lots of individual examples of it, but much less of that just kind of a broad coverage. But there is, however, a lot of literature on foresight in general, which isn't exactly the same as participatory futures but there's a lot of overlap. And essentially, one of the main differences between participatory futures and foresight is the obvious one is involving citizens. And lots of foresight is often done with just big organisations, experts and academics, maybe a bit of government and doesn't involve people that much. Also, participatory futures tends to involve digital technologies and is a bit more creative and edgy than traditional sort of more analytical foresight techniques. But some good general foresight resources are the Government Office of horizon scanning, the Government Office of Science, sorry. It's got its horizon scanning toolkit, that's quite good. Nesta's, again plugging your own work, has done a sort of leaflet on different sort of foresight techniques that we've done a sort of couple in the past. And are there others that are good? There are many out there, I think, Save the Children did a good one. Save the Children's relatively accessible so there's some sort of starting point. Does that help?

**Rhys Herriott** 32:59

Hopefully. I think it's true, I think there's excellent, some really nice examples there that people can look into it in their own time and play around think about how that could fit into their own organisation. I think a follow up to that, then Laurie, I guess would be as someone who's starting out in this sort of journey of trying to roll participatory futures out within their organisation, are there some common traps or pitfalls that people should be on the lookout for? Or what are the common mistakes that people can make when setting out on this journey?

**Laurie Smith** 33:32

Well I suppose some of that was sort of covered in the tips I mentioned, but first is get senior buy in. Because unless, because often these things are seeking to influence decision making. And if the participatory futures process is disconnected from that decision making, then it sort of can be interesting, but essentially doesn't change very much. So you've got to have that sort of buy in and a clear link with decision making. It's fine that that participatory process can't decide everything. But as you need to be clear about what it does and doesn't decide. So in other words, people can get quite unhappy about being involved in something and finding out it doesn't change anything. So there's a classic exercise of this was something called GM Nation the government did about GM food in the early noughties, where it did a giant consultation exercise with the public. It essentially had most of the people involved walk out on it, because essentially, they felt the answer was predetermined, and this wasn't going to change anything. So you've got to have that sort of link. That's sort of one thing. The second thing I suppose is to be and you might get answers that you don't like. So what can sometimes be done with participatory futures, but public engagement more generally, is people want actually want a particular answer. They don't really want to listen to what citizens have to say. And what if they say something they don't like? And you've got to be prepared to manage that. And it needs to be sort of framed in the right way, I suppose in a silly example of it might be something like the Boaty McBoatface, which isn't about the future, but you might remember there was a thing where they asked the public to name a ship and got a name they probably weren't looking for. But more seriously, there can be things like say the Brexit referendum where, irrespective of personal view on Brexit, I don't think David Cameron and George Osborne wanted the outcome that they got, but they got it, which I think is sort of interesting. And I suppose the other thing is also be clear that participatory futures is quite innovative and sort of cutting edge techniques, it's not well evaluated. So using it does take a risk. And that's good because it's innovative and fun and novel, but it means it might not necessarily work. It's not as well as established as lots of other methodologies. So if you want to be innovative, great, that innovation sometimes comes with a cost or a risk. Does that help?

**Rhys Herriott** 35:45

So it sounds like a key thing then is carefully considering the environment and the problem or issue that you're trying to shed light on, before setting out on this is thinking through: is this the right method? Or the right time to apply this method? Or do we have the right operating environment to roll it out in, making sure that you're thinking through, like any innovation process, how can we make this effective and successful? We'll give a couple more minutes for people to submit any questions that might come to mind. In the meantime, Laura, I don't know if you want to talk us through what our next event will be. We'll be looking at.

**Laura Ferris** 36:22

Yeah, sure. So I'll just share my screen briefly again. So just firstly, a huge thank you to Laurie for that great session, I hope everyone got as much out of it as I certainly did. So kind of another shameless plug for the next session up in our On the Menu series. It's going to be taking place 30th November, 12:30pm again, for around an hour, the kind of format of it will be very similar to this one. So the title is: The Role of Innovation in Crisis Situations. So the next session will explore kind of the role of innovation in the climate crisis. So we'll be joined by Mike Fletcher, who's Arup Fellow and Global Water Business Leader, and he'll be talking about innovative approaches and solutions kind of borne out of different extreme situations so that will be including lessons learned from the Cape Town Day Zero crisis as well. So you've got the link there to register to the webinar already. And I believe one of my colleagues will also drop it in the Zoom chat too. Go ahead and get registered. And you can always if you have any questions about the session as well, you can always drop us an email at the waterinnovation@nesta.org.uk email address too. So that is that. I'm not sure if we've had any other questions come through.

**Rhys Herriott** 37:47

I think that's, I think that's it. Laurie, did you have any final words of wisdom for us all before we before we leave this afternoon, otherwise, thank you very much for sharing your time and expertise, really appreciate it. And just anyone who's on the line today, please feel free to drop us an email if any questions come to mind afterwards. And we'll try and sort of connect you through to some of the resources that Laurie mentioned today.

**Laurie Smith** 38:15

There's a question that's just come up.

**Rhys Herriott** 38:18

How do you avoid cynicism from those engaged in the participatory sessions? I.e. I'll never hear anything about how successful this initiative was. Great question, Steve. Laurie, any thoughts on combating sort of participant cynicism?

**Laurie Smith** 38:33

Well, I suppose. Good question. One is make sure you've got a clear route to impact as I've discussed, so you've got senior leaders involved. Second, have an evaluation system set up so you can at least see if it did or didn't work. And I say it's good project management to have a feedback mechanism to say, right, here's what we here's why we're trying to do it, here's what we did. And then X months or whatever afterwards, here is the result or lack of results thereof. Does that make sense?

**Rhys Herriott** 39:06

So essentially, sort of providing, making sure that when someone is in the room and engaging with you in one of these sort of participatory sessions, making sure that you're being transparent with them and showing that we do have this buy in and that there is this pathway, and this is how you'll find out how your answers and contributions today are being used. Is that a fair summary?

**Laurie Smith** 39:26

Yeah, it's essentially having good process and governance, having that process and making it clear that process exists. So and then, if someone asks about it, you can say, well, this is the way in which you've got that sort of feedback.

**Rhys Herriott** 39:41

Excellent, thank you. And then Clive has also suggested you could ask participants to opt in to receive updates afterwards or join a sort of consortium afterwards and sort of build that I guess community around a problem or issue which is an excellent idea as well. I think with that, unless there's any final questions coming in? I think we can probably close the session there. So, yes, thank you everyone for dialing in today. Thanks again, Laurie, for coming along. And I believe we'll have a brief survey for you to fill in before you close the Zoom window. Thank you very much.

**Laura Ferris** 40:22

Thanks again everyone for joining and thanks, Laurie. I will launch the poll now. So please do respond before you leave. Thank you.