HOW TO ORGANISE A **POLICY HACKATHON:**
A PRACTICAL GUIDE

How to organise a Policy Hackathon: A practical guide

How to organise a Policy Hackathon: A practical guide

I.   A guide to the guide

This guide offers an overview of Policy Hackathons, including what they entail, how they operate, their suitability for specific policy-making processes, and who is involved in the process. It also provides a step-by-step approach to explain how to carry out a Policy Hackathon event.

Its objective is to better equip organisations, local governments, and policymakers with the necessary information to envision Policy Hackathons as an additional tool to support and empower citizens to co-create effective policies. It's equally valuable for activists and citizens eager to understand how these events operate and bring fellow community members into the co-creation of policies.

II.   The method

a.   What are Policy Hackathons?

A Policy Hackathon is one of several participatory policy-making tools one can use to gather different stakeholders and achieve the goal of creating more relevant and adequate policies that benefit society at large.

At its core, a Policy Hackathon is a creative forum for understanding policy challenges and co-creating solutions. It offers a dynamic and interactive way to involve citizens in governance processes. Happening over a span of one to two days, Policy Hackathons provide a platform for crowdsourcing ideas through direct and active exchange among various groups related to and affected by the respective policy area. Its format fosters rapid idea prototyping and iterative development while mobilising the collective intelligence of participants.

Through facilitated interactions between a diverse mix of stakeholders, Policy Hackathons bring government and civil society together, leveraging diverse perspectives by involving the range of expertise and experiential knowledge needed to address policy problems. Its collaborative approach prioritises stakeholder input and insights, aiming to generate actionable policy recommendations rooted in the lived experiences of those involved, thereby developing policies more aligned with stakeholders' needs and expectations.

In practice, Policy Hackathons take the form of user-driven policy workshops, which foster a highly inventive environment, harnessing collective creativity to generate out-of-the-box solutions for identified problems while stimulating policy proposals with real-world impact.

b.   How do Policy Hackathons work?

During the course of a day or two, a series of facilitated and collaborative workshops will replicate the Agenda Setting and Drafting stages of the ADDIS Process. During these workshops, participants are encouraged to adopt a policymaker's perspective, empathising with the responsibilities, expectations, and challenges of the role to generate

ideas and proposals aimed at overcoming barriers and addressing issues within the relevant policy area.

Policy Hackathon participants will engage in a set of activities that will enable them to:

- **Unite** different perspectives, through the mobilisation of policy users, experts and policy makers, to create a shared understanding of the policy area and recognition of the diversity of challenges;
- **Define** the overall goal and the specific issues to be addressed through the formulation of problem statements;
- **Ideate** a diverse range of creative and practical policy solutions through brainstorming exercises;
- **Design** concrete policy proposals to tackle the identified policy issues.

c. Why (and why not) Policy Hackathons?

Policy Hackathons are an invaluable tool to achieve the goal of harnessing the power of co-created policies. This is achieved through the maximisation of creativity and the involvement of those who have the best understanding of the challenges faced by everyday citizens, empowering them to find solutions for relevant policies. However, as with every policy-making tool, Policy Hackathons are not a universal solution. They are more appropriate in some cases than others, depending on the objectives, stages, and issues it intends to address. This item of the Guide will offer support for the decision on whether to adopt the Policy Hackathon as a tool in a specific policy-making process.

i. The benefits

As an inclusive and creative process, Policy Hackathons convey the following benefits, in terms of tangible outcomes:

- **Innovative Solutions:** The environment nurtured in Policy Hackathons leads to innovative and creative policy solutions to address complex challenges in novel ways.
- **Policy Proposals and their Impact:** As a result of the event, a set of comprehensive policy proposals are created, ready for further consideration, potentially leading to significant changes and developments in policy and practice.
- **In-depth understanding of stakeholders' positions:** The dialogues facilitated on Policy Hackathons lead to a deeper grasp of stakeholders' needs, interests, aspirations and the constraints they face while dealing with the subject policy area, providing valuable information for the policy making process beyond the event.

Additionally, as a highly collaborative tool, placing stakeholders at the heart of policy making, it also has positive relational implications:

- **Network Strengthening:** The participative approach helps bridge the divide between the people that policies affect and the people that make policy, strengthening networks among participants, and enabling improved communication and collaboration in future policy initiatives.
- **Increased Transparency and Trust:** The open approach fosters transparency, provides a secure environment for policy recommendations and suggestions, with the potential to increase trust in public institutions and policy processes.

ii. The shortcomings

While a Policy Hackathon is an invaluable instrument for participatory policy making, it may not always be suitable for every case or stage of the process. The decision to use them should also consider its shortcomings, such as:

- **Isolated interaction**: The one-off nature of the event results in a time-specific engagement with stakeholders, which may not ensure a lasting relationship and ongoing interaction unless integrated into broader stakeholder engagement and participation strategies.
- **Provisional stage:** Considering the brainstorming (rather than final decision making) nature of the event, the suggestions and proposals may not imply a direct and substantial impact on the resulting policy, requiring a careful management of stakeholders' expectations.

d. Who is involved in Policy Hackathons?

Finally, before providing guidance on how to carry out a Policy Hackathon, it is necessary to identify the key roles involved in the process:

- **Organisers:** The entity/organisation that is responsible for planning, executing, and managing the Centralised Deliberative Consultation.
- **Facilitators:** Trusted and trained individuals responsible for guiding and managing the Policy Hackathon activities, ensuring smooth communication and active participation among participants. Policy Hackathon Facilitators take on diverse responsibilities, some of which may be concentrated in one person:
  - **MC and Animator (Lead Facilitator):** The facilitator who leads the session, maintains the flow of the discussion, and ensures engagement from participants.
  - **Conductor:** An individual experienced in the context who provides inputs on the design of the activities and conducts the workshops, facilitating the discussions.
  - **Harvester:** Responsible for collecting and organising the inputs and opinions manifested by the participants during the workshops.
  - **Timekeeper:** Responsible for keeping track of time and ensuring that all activities happen according to the predefined agenda. Flexibility might be required to accommodate schedule adaptations when needed.
- **Participants:** The stakeholders who participate and contribute their ideas and insights to the process.
- **Observers:** Individuals tasked with observing the proceedings of the workshop without actively participating. They may provide feedback or insights afterward.

III. Navigating Policy Hackathons Step by Step

This section of the Guide will provide suggestions for activities to be carried out during the Policy Hackathon based on previous experiences. Policymakers should bear in mind that there is no one formula for the activities that organisers and facilitators should carry out and that Policy Hackathons should take the most adequate form to the specific policy-making process. Therefore, the decision ultimately rests in the organisers' and

facilitators' hands. All activities should be goal-oriented and suitable to address the topic(s) at hand.

The following step-by-step guide is based on a one-day Policy Hackathon, with an option for an extended two-day version offered in item v.

a. Getting ready for a Policy Hackathon

As with any other tool, Policy Hackathons require following certain preparatory steps. These include identifying the relevant policy issues and objectives of the event, delineating the current stage of the policy-making process, mapping stakeholders, and identifying which relevant actors are currently included and excluded from the policy-making process. Additionally, it involves assessing resource availability, defining resource allocation, and choosing an adequate venue. This includes deciding whether the event will take place in person, online, or in a hybrid setting.

As a result of the preparatory steps, each Policy Hackathon will vary according to its objectives, to the topic being addressed, and to its main audience.

b. Carrying-out the event

Policy Hackathons typically occur within the course of a day, yet preparations for the event commence several weeks in advance. This involves raising awareness about the event and encouraging early engagement with participants.

On the day of the event, the Policy Hackathon is organised into four main stages: Setting Goals and Values, Co-creating Problem Statements, Brainstorming Solutions, and Designing Policy Proposals. Each stage is described below.

i. Setting Goals **and** Values

Before jumping into the essence of the Policy Hackathon, it is important to cover a few basic formalities to ensure everyone is on the same page. Taking a moment to welcome and introduce participants, provide opening remarks, discuss the agenda and housekeeping matters, including ground rules, and outline logistical guidelines can set the stage for a smooth and productive event.

At this point, it is also important to take the opportunity to manage participant's expectations in terms of how the outcomes of the Policy Hackathons will affect the resulting policies, clarifying that Policy Hackathons are generative and creative processes intended to provide inputs into the policy making process, which will then be further analysed and selected by policymakers.

Time Management: Allow 1 hour in total for this introductory session.

ii. Co-creating Problem Statements

After introducing participants and aligning their expectations for the day, the focus shifts to delving into the main concerns within the respective policy area. The objective is to foster discussions that advance shared understanding and common interests. The primary outcome of this stage is to articulate specific, clear, and concise problem statements that will serve as guides for the subsequent stages of the Policy Hackathon.

- **The Modified World Café**[1]

The Modified World Café is the technique suggested to facilitate generative discussions that enable the exploration of topics and to support the identification of constraints in the respective policy area. As an outcome of this workshop, participants suggest problem statements that frame the policy challenges identified.

<u>Step by step:</u>

1. Briefly explain the structure of the Modified World Café and its expected outcomes.
2. Randomly divide participants into groups of reflection guided by discussion topics and questions.
   ● The groups should be as diverse as possible in terms of its composition.
   ● The number of groups will depend on the overall number of participants, the number of facilitators available, and the number of guiding questions provided for the discussion.
     ○ It is generally recommended to keep each group to a maximum of 20 participants. If fully facilitated group discussions are preferred, the number of groups will align with the number of questions and facilitators. However, if self-facilitated discussions are allowed, there may be more groups and guiding questions than facilitators.
3. Ask groups to brainstorm challenges and constraints on the policy area, based on the specific discussion topic and/or question.
4. Support groups in summarising and completing their ideas.
5. Rotate the topics or questions discussed by each group every 20-30 minutes. During each rotation, instruct groups to build upon the challenges identified by the preceding group.
6. Record group's problem statements.
7. Optional: If there is time, groups might be asked to prioritise and rank their challenges according to their perceived impact and urgency. In this case, one representative from each group can then present up to 10 key challenges to all participants.

<u>Time Management:</u> Allow 20-30 minutes each round of the Modified World Cafe, for a total session of ± 2 hours including transitions and the introduction of the activity.

<u>Note:</u> There are three types of facilitators supporting this activity: (i) a single coordinated timekeeper who will indicate to all participants when the transitions take place; (ii) one discussion facilitator to support each table; (iii) one harvester facilitator to support each table.

iii. Brainstorming solutions

The objective of this stage of the Policy Hackathon is to collectively construct policy solutions that address the constraints and issues reflected in the co-created problem statements. The expected outcome is the proposition of diverse policy solutions which will then be turned into structured policy proposals.

---

[1] For further details on the fundamentals of the World Cafe method, created by Juanita Brown and David Isaacs, see https://theworldcafe.com/

<u>Time management</u>: Allow a total of ± 2 hours and 30 minutes for this session, including Role Play and Bar Camp.

- Role Play

After defining the problem statements, participants will be asked to brainstorm possible solutions to the identified challenges. To achieve this, participants will envision and design policy solutions by means of a Role Play exercise which will immerse them in the perspective of policymakers. The objective is to generate creative and practical policy solutions ideas across a diverse range of ideas.

<u>Step by Step</u>:

1. Brief explanation of the structure of the Role Play and its expected outcomes.
2. Policymaker's presentation of current policy framework followed by Questions & Answers.
3. Once participants have a frame of reference, introduce the role play exercise to unlock creativity and let participants brainstorm ideas.
4. Asking participants to individually reflect and come up with ideas to address the identified problem statements from the perspective of the policymaker.
5. Ask participants to come up with 40-second pitches for their ideas to be presented in the next session.

<u>Time management</u>: Allow ± 45 minutes for the policymaker's presentation and Questions & Answers, for a total of 1 hour and 45 minutes for this activity. Step 4 of this activity is usually conducted over the lunch break.

- Bar Camp[2]

The next stage of the Policy Hackathon focuses on bringing participant's ideas together to further develop them. Adopting a user-generated approach, participants are asked to pitch their ideas and autonomously group the presented solutions according to topics and/or types of solutions, which will then allow participants to subsequently work in clusters to further shape their ideas into policies.

<u>Step by Step</u>:

1. Briefly explain the self-organising structure of the BarCamp and its expected outcomes.
2. Conduct an energizer exercise to boost energy levels, enhance focus, or encourage participation.
3. Ask each participant to pitch their solution in 40 seconds.
4. As participants present their pitches, cluster the solutions based on the similarity of their proposed solutions and policy interests.
5. Participants will choose their preferred clusters to work with on the next workshop.

<u>Time management</u>: Allow a total of ± 1 hour for this session.

iv.   Designing Policy Proposals

In the final stage of the creative process of a Policy Hackathon, a facilitated co-creation workshop will support participants, divided into cluster groups, in developing their ideas

---

[2] For further details on the fundamentals of the BarCamp method, created by Ryan King, Tantek Çelik, Eris Stassi, Chris Messina, Andy Smith, and Matt Mullenweg, see http://barcamp.org/

and solutions into structured policy proposals. This session clusters participants based on the similarity of their proposed solutions and policy interests. A template should be provided for participants to focus on content rather than structure.

Step by Step:

1. Briefly explain the structure of Facilitated Co-Creation and its expected outcomes.
2. Ask participants to develop policies within the cluster groups according to a predetermined template to be provided to participants.
3. Ask a representative of each cluster group to present their policy proposal to all participants, offering an overview of how a policy intervention might work to solve the problems they identified.
4. Collect proposals from cluster groups.

Time management: Allow a total of ± 1 hour and 45 minutes for group work in this session.

v. The outcome

Different from other types of hackathons, Policy Hackathons have a non-competitive nature. In this format, the proposals resulting from the one-day event are themselves the outcome of the event, being compiled and provided to the relevant policymakers.

Step by Step:

1. At the end of the day, reiterate the management of participant's expectations by informing them of the next steps and the fact that some aspects of the policy proposals might or might not be reflected in the resulting relevant policies.

Extended version: Where there is more time and resources available, the Policy Hackathon could be extended for an additional day, in which an additional activity is added on a second day of the event when the proposals designed by participants on the previous day are subject to voting from all participants. Based on a deliberative democracy approach, the activity would be carried out in the following steps:

1. Briefly explain the voting process and its outcomes.
2. Make the policy proposals from each cluster group available to all participants (eg. by posting them on a wall).
3. Ask participants to evaluate the policy proposals and vote on their preferred solution based on predetermined criteria.
4. Obtain feedback and final recommendations from other participants.
5. At the end of the second day of the event, inform the winning policy proposal based on participant's vote and reiterate the management of participant's expectations by informing them of the next steps and the fact that some aspects of the policy proposals might or might not be reflected in the resulting relevant policies.

In the two-day Policy Hackathon, the outcome will be a compilation of the winning policy proposal, the additional data and the feedback provided by participants, which will then be gathered into a document and delivered to the relevant policymakers.

In both cases, the final documents reflecting the outcomes of a one-day and two-day Policy Hackathon will be (a) translated by the organisers, considering inputs provided by the facilitators, into the adequate framework needed by the relevant policymakers, and (b)

harvested by policy experts with knowledge of the respective policy process and policy area.

c. Wrapping Up the Process

The Policy Hackathon doesn't end with the event. As is the case with any other tool, it is important to take steps to guarantee the dissemination of its results, as well as its continuous refinement, reflecting on outcomes and lessons learnt to enhance the effectiveness of future Policy Hackathons through feedback and evaluation of the process and outcomes.