Our Growing Understanding of Community Engagement

What is Community Engagement?

In the course of our research we found that community engagement is often cited as a method to improve communities by identifying and addressing local ideas, concerns and opportunities. It includes things like the involvement of the public in processes that affect them and their community. We also found:

- Community Engagement can be passive or proactive
- Community Engagement as a process
- Community Engagement empowers communities
- Community Engagement is not limited by time
- Community Engagement favours multisectoral collaboration
- Some Key Criteria

Community Engagement can be passive or proactive

We discovered that approaches to community engagement vary depending on the level of engagement one is trying to achieve. As the levels of engagement extend from consultation to empowerment, different community engagement strategies will be used. As a result, community engagement can be applied in a variety of ways.

Passive approaches inform people about decisions or consult with them by asking them questions. This approach however, does not bring the public into the decision-making process.

Proactive approaches on the other hand give more control over decision-making to the public. They encourage the public to participate in the development of action plans that meet their needs and interests. Communities are empowered to take on initiatives independently from external organizations. Both passive and proactive approaches are valuable for achieving community engagement. Each involves the public in some level of engagement.

Community Engagement as a process

We want to focus on process(es) that bring people together; the broad engagement of organizations and people. We believe these processes can enable collective change (changing attitudes, building social capital, etc.) and create movement in communities. Good community engagement will build agreement around issues and create momentum for communities to address local issues. It includes achieving outcomes and creating solutions to community needs.

Community Engagement empowers communities

Community engagement also includes following a process that ensures communities determine local priorities, and all stakeholder groups are represented. Citizens need to be at the center of the community engagement process. This process ensures communities are empowered and have control over their resources and the decision-making process.

Community Engagement is not limited by time

We also believe that valuable community engagement processes and outcomes can be ongoing or episodic. They are not limited by time. Both short-term and long-term community engagement projects can have dramatic impacts on communities.

Community Engagement favours multisectoral collaboration

We think that community engagement involves a diverse number of stakeholders and can include a number of sectors. Different people, groups and sectors can collaborate and work together to discuss ideas, create plans and implement solutions to community problems. Multisectoral collaboration can create dynamic and creative communities and foster networks and new relationships.

Through multisectoral collaboration all participants work together as equals to create solutions for their community. Therefore any player, including citizens, organizations, and government, can initiate community engagement, as long as the process works collaboratively with communities.

Key Criteria

We find that our understanding of community engagement is best reflected in seven key criteria. These criteria show, at this time, our approach to community engagement.

- A broad range of people are participating and are engaged
- People are trying to solve complex issues
- The engagement process creates vision, achieves results, creates movement and/or change
- Different sectors are included in the process
- There is a focus on collaboration and social inclusion
- The community determines local priorities
- There is a balance between community engagement processes and creating action

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