Community Engagement

By Lorna McCue, Executive Director, Ontario Healthy Communities Coalition

Introduction

Community engagement is a key building block of healthy communities. The Ottawa Charter for Health Promotion includes “strengthening community action” as one of its five action areas, stating: “Health promotion works through concrete and effective community action in setting priorities, making decisions, planning strategies and implementing them to achieve better health. At the heart of this process is the empowerment of communities, their ownership and control of their own endeavours and destinies.”

There seems to be a common understanding that no one group can solve today’s complex policy problems and that better decisions are made when the affected stakeholder groups are involved. Various models of community engagement and government-citizen collaboration have emerged, with the goal of breaking down “silos” and creating new partnerships.

This resource is an updated and expanded version of the original 2011 edition. It describes various levels and types of community engagement, outlines important considerations, and provides tips on how to develop and manage a successful community engagement effort. A list of resources is provided to support further investigation of this topic.

Download this resource at www.hclinkontario.ca/images/2018/communityengagement.pdf
This resource is also available in French.
The term “community engagement” is used throughout this resource to include both “community engagement” and “citizen engagement”. There are many similarities in the models, approaches and tools used, but “citizen engagement” is usually related to engagement efforts by government, whereas “community engagement” is applied more broadly to various institutions, agencies, and other decision-making bodies.

Many definitions of community engagement are found in the literature. The following definition by the Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), in its first edition of *Principles of Community Engagement*, published in 1997, has been widely quoted. Community engagement is:

> “…the process of working collaboratively with and through groups of people affiliated by geographic proximity, special interest, or similar situations to address issues affecting the well-being of those people. It is a powerful vehicle for bringing about environmental and behavioral changes that will improve the health of the community and its members. It often involves partnerships and coalitions that help mobilize resources and influence systems, change relationships among partners, and serve as catalysts for changing policies, programs, and practices.”

What is Community?

The meaning of the term “community” is very complex. Some feel that community is “both a feeling and a set of relationships among people. People form and maintain communities to meet common needs…Feelings of community come from shared experience and a sense of shared history.” For the purposes of this resource, the term “community” refers to a “group of people living in the same place or having a particular characteristic in common.”

Benefits of Community Engagement

Community engagement provides benefits to both community members and decision-makers. When municipalities, institutions or agencies engage community members in planning and decision-making, it increases the understanding of community members about complex issues and how decisions are made. It also provides a means for decision-makers to understand the community’s values, needs, and preferences.

Community engagement efforts enable community members to take part in decisions and practices which interest or affect them, and to provide informed input into proposed plans or policies. Increasing the sense of ownership of the processes increases the chance of better outcomes being reached. Two-way communication allows decision-makers to tap into a wider range of expertise and experience, and an opportunity to convey the reasons for their proposed actions to the public. Community engagement helps build capacity and sustainability in communities and leads to outcomes that are more fully reflective of the needs and aspirations of the whole community.
Addressing Barriers to Community Engagement

Some people may feel apprehensive about participating in a community engagement process, while others are skeptical of its value. Organizers might be concerned about losing control or people having unreasonable expectations. For an engagement initiative to be successful, these concerns cannot be ignored. Many can be addressed with “political commitment, proper planning, clear objective setting, transparent communication with participants, and a flexibility to adjust course as required to deal with emerging realities.”

In *Handbook on Citizen Engagement: Beyond Consultation*, author Amanda Sheedy identifies several potential barriers to community engagement and ways to address them. A few of them are outlined below:

- **Time**: People who are juggling multiple commitments (e.g. work, school, family) are less able to participate in events. Consultation with the target population regarding appropriate time and location, and providing food and childcare may be helpful.
- **Social and cultural barriers**: People from different social classes and cultural backgrounds will have different levels of experience with community engagement. It will be important to hold events in trusted locations. The level of trust can be increased by connecting with people through a cultural association or not-for-profit agency. The engagement of Indigenous peoples will require specific considerations.
- **Economic access**: Engagement can be encouraged by providing an honorarium to compensate for lost work time, childcare, and transportation expenses, etc.
- **Language and communication**: Consider whether translation or interpretation will be needed to engage some members of the target population.
- **Framing**: How the issue or proposal is described will have a large impact on who attends, as different groups might value and perceive issues very differently.
- **Physical access**: Ensure that event space is accessible and advertise it as such. Give sufficient notice of the event for people who need to plan for adapted transport, or provide adapted transportation for them.
There are several levels of community engagement, which have been characterized differently by various authors. However, most reference IAP2’s Public Participation Spectrum (shown below). It depicts five levels that form a continuum of community engagement: inform, consult, involve, collaborate, and empower. The continuum does not proceed in discrete levels; some community engagement efforts may only involve one level, while others could include two or three levels at different times or in different events at the same time.

Max Hardy points out that the spectrum is a framework for different levels of engagement, and not a hierarchy. One level is not better than another except in terms of which one is most appropriate to the particular situation.12

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>IAP2’S PUBLIC PARTICIPATION SPECTRUM</th>
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<tr>
<th>PUBLIC PARTICIPATION GOAL</th>
<th>INFORM</th>
<th>CONSULT</th>
<th>INVOLVE</th>
<th>COLLABORATE</th>
<th>EMPOWER</th>
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<td></td>
<td>To provide the public with balanced and objective information to assist them in understanding the problem, alternatives, opportunities and/or solutions.</td>
<td>To obtain public feedback on analysis, alternatives and/or decisions.</td>
<td>To work directly with the public throughout the process to ensure that public concerns and aspirations are consistently understood and considered.</td>
<td>To partner with the public in each aspect of the decision including the development of alternatives and the identification of the preferred solution.</td>
<td>To place final decision making in the hands of the public.</td>
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| PROMISE TO THE PUBLIC | We will keep you informed. | We will keep you informed, listen to and acknowledge concerns and aspirations, and provide feedback on how public input influenced the decision. We will seek your feedback on drafts and proposals. | We will work with you to ensure that your concerns and aspirations are directly reflected in the alternatives developed and provide feedback on how public input influenced the decision. | We will work together with you to formulate solutions and incorporate your advice and recommendations into the decisions to the maximum extent possible. | We will implement what you decide. |

Source: IAP2’s Public Participation Spectrum
1. Informing Community Members

In general, providing information alone is not community engagement. However, it is often included in the community engagement spectrum as a necessary prerequisite. Also, the style and placement of informational messages can vary its level of engagement and have an impact on the recruitment of participants.

For the most part, information flows in one direction, typically from a government department or organization to community members, often as a means of raising awareness or educating people of community issues or the need for a change in policy. The communication can take a variety of forms such as flyers, brochures, posters, fact sheets, websites, or open houses. While information provision is very important, the level of engagement with communities is generally very low when using these one-way channels. Use of social media may be more engaging than traditional communication methods, but significant commitment to keep them active and current is required. Often the dissemination of information will precede more intensive community engagement strategies.

When developing a plan to provide information to community members, it is best to include a number of different approaches to ensure you reach as many people as possible. Text size and font, use of graphics, colour, and clear language are important considerations when you are attempting to engage people through print or online materials.

2. Community Consultation

Before initiating any community consultation, it is vital that sufficient time and resources are allocated to conduct a community assessment to ensure the community is ready and willing to be involved. HC Link consultants have found effective consultations require:

- A clear understanding of your goals, for example, are you consulting the community for their input, for confirmation of your research findings, or to educate them on an important health concern?
- A clear understanding and acknowledgement of the community’s interest, i.e., what is in it for them? For example, will they be able to increase their ability to impact public policy and program decisions, or increase the level of awareness and responsiveness of government to their situation?
- Democratic processes to ensure that minority voices are heard and efforts are made to engage and welcome individuals from marginalized sectors of the community.
- Sufficient time for appropriate planning, communications, and relationship building at the start of the process, to carry out the consultation effectively, and to follow up on the results.
If you are only considering one way of doing something, there is no reason to consult. If you are presenting options for community members to choose from, you need to present sufficient information about the options and their strengths and weaknesses so community members are able to make an informed choice. The Consultation Model shown here further explains this.

### 3. Involving the Community

This level usually consists of creating opportunities for the public to provide input and ideas to help develop potential solutions. Rather than consulting on predetermined options, the community is invited to participate earlier in the process and to help develop solutions and suggest methods and approaches. Ultimately the organization will still make decisions, but those decisions will be informed by ideas and input. Community engagement approaches that may be used to involve community members include workshops and deliberative polling.

### 4. Community Collaboration

Successful community collaboration requires a high level of human and organizational resources and the management of complex relationships. Collaborative partners must have a high level of commitment, investment, and sense of ownership over the collaborative process. Because of this, it is important to have a strong rationale for implementing a collaborative strategy.

Collaborative structures are appropriate and perhaps even necessary when tackling broad community or population level goals, such as reducing poverty, increasing physical activity, decreasing homelessness, or combating air pollution. To have a significant impact in any of these areas, several organizations in different sectors need to work together to develop and implement a coordinated plan. Community collaborations are also useful when the goal is to coordinate the delivery of services, address systemic concerns, or create a coordinated community response to an issue.

During the planning phase, it is wise to take the time to identify and connect with any coalitions or networks already in place that have an interest in the goal or issue being addressed. For collaborations to be successful, there must be a high degree of trust between partners, as well as a clear and transparent process with agreed-upon goals and terms of reference. Members may play different roles within the collaboration, e.g. convener, technical assistance, community organizer, or fundraiser.
**Benefits of Collaboration**

HC Link consultants have found there are many benefits to collaboration.\(^{15}\)

**Synergy:** The accomplishments of the collaborative will be greater than each group working on its own could ever hope to achieve.

**Community Capacity:** Increased awareness of community issues, needs, and assets will foster the sharing and expansion of resources and the emergence of innovative solutions.

**Reduction of Barriers:** Obstacles faced by one group may be overcome by another group with a different set of resources and connections.

**Community Representation:** A collaborative has a stronger voice than a single organization because it has broader community representation.

**Effectiveness:** Working together can help ensure efforts and services are not being duplicated, increase the accountability of both organizations and individuals, and lead to a more equitable distribution of resources.

However, there are many challenges as well.

- Conflicting agendas and organizational philosophies can hijack the collaborative.
- Well-meaning members might become so focused on accommodating all partners that their strategies either become too broad to accomplish anything concrete, or they take on too many issues and overextend the capacity of the collaborative.
- Varying skill and comfort levels as well as differences in energy and commitment of participants can cause tension within a collaborative.
- Challenges may also be encountered when the individuals involved have vastly different perspective on the issue due to a wide span of cultural, political, or economic experiences.

There is often a positive correlation between the services of a skilled facilitator, whether paid or volunteer, and successful collaborations. Despite the challenges of collaboration, when it is working well, it can exert a powerful force that yields great benefits to communities.

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**Principles of Effective Collaboration**

Here are some tips on effective collaboration from Professor D. Brackenreed at Nipissing University in North Bay.\(^{16}\)

- Establish common goals
- Ensure voluntary participation
- Recognize equality among participants
- Share responsibility for participation and decision-making
- Share accountability for outcomes (successes and failures)
- Share resources
5. Community Empowerment

Empowerment is about increasing community capacity to have a real and lasting influence on the decision-making that affects the quality and delivery of services provided by government and others. Building community capacity generally involves people learning together to develop the skills, knowledge, and confidence they need to: understand the context and options for decision-making, discuss implications, and evaluate different points of view.

You cannot empower people, but you can help create the conditions in which they can empower themselves. When we engage community members in a way that promotes their empowerment, we work with them on an equal basis to explore issues and find solutions.

Here are a few principles for promoting community empowerment:

**Community issue identification**
For a community initiative to be successful over the long term, the issue(s) to be addressed must be identified by the community as a priority on which they feel compelled to take action. Aligning the mandate of a funded program and the interests of the community can be tricky, and may require some intervening activities such as linking your work with other community priorities, raising awareness of why the issue is important, or narrowing the sectors that will be involved to those most directly affected. Ultimately, if there is no real community commitment, the initiative will fail.

**Community control**
Empowered communities hold onto the reins of their community projects, from their initial conceptualization, through the planning phases to implementation, evaluation, and communications. Throughout these phases, decision-making power rests with the community – not because an external agency is “allowing” them to make decisions, but because they actually have the power to do so.

**Community expertise**
In every community there is a wealth of knowledge, skills, and experiences to be harnessed to help solve community issues. Discovering the assets, capacities and abilities of a community is an important activity in any type of community work. They can then be connected in ways that multiply their power and effectiveness. Community members are the “experts” on their own community; they know what will work and what will not, who needs to be involved and what it will take to achieve success.

**Access to external resources**
While there are often untapped resources in a community, large-scale change efforts often require outside support, such as funding, hired consultants, and other resources. An empowered community will decide which funding sources to approach and the scope of the work they wish to have funded. They will hire the consultants of their choosing and negotiate a work plan with them.
Sheedy identifies several steps to developing a community engagement process. They are presented in a rational, chronological order, but often the steps will become blurred, with a new step starting before the previous one has finished, or different individuals being involved in different steps simultaneously. Sometimes some of the steps are skipped altogether, particularly if they do not seem appropriate to the situation or timing. These steps are outlined and explored below.

1. Preparation

**Consider context, determine goals, rationale:** Gather information about the issue and the community to be engaged, and place the initiative within the context of the organization leading it, as well as the broader social and political realm. i.e., why is community engagement important to the proposed policy or program? The goals set at the beginning will guide the rest of the planning process, although they may evolve as plans unfold.

**Assess community engagement requirements:** Before starting, you need to confirm the necessary requirements are in place, e.g. time, resources, and organizational capacity.

2. Designing the Process

**Develop internal capacity:** Taking on a community engagement process could require a shift in roles and responsibilities, reallocation of resources, or training.

**Frame the issue:** Once the issue has been identified, it needs to be described in a way that resonates with the various segments of the population. This framing needs to be consistent throughout all communications, from initial information to the final outcomes and include the change that you want to affect.

**Recruit participants:** A challenging question in the field of community engagement is how to reach people beyond the “usual suspects” – those who willingly participate over and over again, attend events, volunteer at numerous organizations, and whose voices are heard loudly and clearly. Who sits down at the table is a critical element of citizen engagement. When planning an event, you could decide to randomly select individuals to invite from a list of potential participants, focus on a particular segment of the community, or have an open invitation to anyone who is interested.
Arrange logistics: Keeping in mind the barriers to engagement, ensure the time and location as well as incentives for attending the event will encourage participation.

Select methods: Choose a method that reflects the goals, time, budget, issue at hand, and the context. Sheedy provides a “Framework for Selection of Engagement Techniques” that suggests methods such as deliberative polls, public hearings, town meetings, consensus conferences, dialogues, study circles, and community juries. Summaries of these methods are given in Appendix A of the Handbook on Citizen Engagement.

Online community engagement: There are a variety of digital technologies that can be used for community engagement, including social media, email, live streaming, mailing lists, newsgroups, forums, surveys, petitions, crowdsourcing, online communities, wikis, and blogs. While there are significant advantages to online engagement methods, there are also significant challenges, such as reaching those with lower levels of connectivity, information overload, and perception of decreased legitimacy. The choice of technology must be dependent on the context of the engagement initiative. See Tamarack’s Technology for Community Engagement for list of digital platforms that can be used for online community engagement.

Provide credible information: To best engage people, key background information, perspectives, and solutions should be provided well ahead of time in a format appropriate for the general population.

Facilitation: The success of a community engagement process depends, at least in part, on good facilitation. The facilitator provides impartial guidance to the group as it works through the process. They “create a balance between ensuring individual participation and producing meaningful results.”

3. Implementation

Sheedy suggests some considerations for ensuring the community engagement process flows smoothly:

- Set ground rules that will ensure respect, fairness, and safety.
- Ensure that staff members and facilitators are clear about their roles during the event.
- Give participants an agenda, a clear explanation of the process, and an idea of how the knowledge generated will be used and reported.
- Where appropriate, have content experts on site to answer questions under the guidance of the facilitator.
- Accommodate participants’ reasonable requests related to design and implementation.
- Allow time for participants to “vent” as this is a natural, healthy part of the process. Efforts should be made to mitigate any concerns expressed by participants. Once completed, participants can move forward in a positive manner.
- Align timing of the community engagement methods with opportunities in the political and policy decision-making process.
4. Evaluation & Reporting

It is important to evaluate the design, implementation, and outcomes of your community engagement efforts. The evaluation should be planned before starting the process, so key information can be captured as various activities take place. The evaluation plan should clearly define what is to be evaluated, the methods to be used, and how participants will be involved. Some areas to consider incorporating into your evaluation are:

- Were the “right” community members involved?
- Did the structure and process enable all voices to be heard?
- In what ways were community members involved?
- What kinds of learning occurred during the process?

Evaluating your community engagement processes will provide valuable information on which methods worked best for certain groups in particular areas, and which were the most appropriate times or venues. These findings will be very helpful to future engagement efforts.

How the results of the engagement initiative are reported and to whom is critical to its overall success. As outlined by Sheedy, “Reporting to participants in a transparent fashion is fundamental to the philosophy underpinning citizen engagement. Without it, power can be maintained in the hands of decision-makers, protecting decision-making processes from the scrutiny of citizens.”

Reports should be prepared for funders, decision-makers, participants and the general public. The report should include not only the outcomes of the initiative but document how the community was engaged, at what stages their input was received, and how they contributed to decision-making.

Success Factors for Community Engagement

The Canada Health Council’s Primer on Public Involvement cites the following as key conditions for success:

- **Representativeness**: Participants must be representative of the population as much as possible.
- **Independence**: The public involvement process must be perceived as fair and independent in that everyone must have a chance to express themselves including those who hold diverging views.
- **Early involvement**: Participants should be involved as early as possible in the process.
- **Influence**: Participants must have a real impact on decision-making.
- **Providing information**: Information must be provided to allow time to learn, discuss, and deliberate. It must be clear, transparent, and easy to understand.
- **Resource accessibility**: Resources must be available to allow meaningful participation. Consider location, venue, timing, and travel support.
- **Structured decision-making**: The community involvement process must be legitimate, transparent, and official. Make sure objectives are realistic and communicated clearly. Have a feedback mechanism around input about decisions in place.
HC Link Resources
HC Link has many relevant resources and webinar recordings on Community Engagement. There are also many resources helpful to working in collaboration on our Partnership Development resource page.

Ontario Healthy Communities Coalition Resources
From the Ground up: An Organizing Handbook for Healthy Communities
Online Courses – Collaboration & Partnerships for Healthy Communities and Community Development Strategies

Community Engagement Resource Library Tamarack Institute

Community Tool Box Work Group for Community Health and Development, University of Kansas
Chapter 7. Encouraging Involvement in Community Work
Increasing Participation and Membership

Community Planning Toolkit: Community Engagement Community Places, 2014

Community Engagement Toolkit Social Planning and Research Council of BC, 2013


Community Engagement Framework Fraser Health, 2009

Principles of Community Engagement Centers for Disease Control/Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry, 2011

Building healthy communities: A community empowerment approach Community Development Foundation, 2010

Building Communities from the Inside Out: A Path toward Finding and Mobilizing a Community’s Assets, John Kretzmann & John McKnight (For more information see Asset-Based Community Development Institute.)
REFERENCES


7 Sheedy, p4.


9 Sheedy, p10.

10 Sheedy, p15.

11 Sheedy, p18.


HC Link helps community groups, organizations, and partnerships drive change by providing consulting services, webinars, workshops, resources and other learning opportunities in both English and French. We provide groups with expertise in a wide range of healthy community topics and health promotion approaches. Our services are funded by the Government of Ontario and are provided free of charge where possible.

To learn more about us or request a service, contact us at:
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