Community Engagement 101

Understand the Impact of Public Consultation

Sally Hussey

Contents

About the Author

Sally Hussey is a researcher and writer who interrogates global challenges in public engagement. As Principal Writer and Editorial Director at Granicus she commissions original, evidence-based research by global experts to inform the wider community, on-the-ground practitioners and engagement professionals on cutting-edge insights and issues in public engagement.

Sally has an extensive background in the publishing, academic and cultural sectors and is recognised by the *Who's Who of Australian Women*.

From What to How to Why

**An Essential Guide to Understanding the Fundamentals
of Community Engagement**

Community engagement can be a complicated concept. Too often, attempts at singular definitions turn the concept of engaging people to have their say on decisions that impact their lives into abstract notions that sideline its essence. Emphasis on the lived experience of community members taking a front seat and local knowledges informing decision-making processes challenges a top-down approach to public decisions. It also deepens democracy at a time when it is under threat the world over.

Community Engagement 101 cuts through these abstract attempts and instead provides a fundamental understanding of the meaning, use and ever-increasing global role of community engagement in public decision-making. With the rise in deepening and expanding public engagement globally – indeed, with the increasing mandating of public participation around the world – the need for answers to straightforward questions is required.

Written for on-the-ground practitioners, engagement professionals and community members, this resource provides accessible explanations that cover the basics and bring an understanding of the principles that underline best-practice engagement. It takes an integrated approach that combines concepts, methods and practice to underline how engagement - including digital engagement - can lead to more equitable policy- and decision-making.

Learn the basics of engagement in the following four accessible chapters organised around pivotal questions:
- What is community engagement?
- How do you engage communities?
- Why is community engagement important?
- What are the benefits of online engagement?

Amplifying these key questions underscores public participation as a fundamental pillar of well-functioning twenty-first-century democracies through forging constructive relationships between communities and the institutions of government. With the rise in lack of trust in government, the erosion of democracy and the deepening and expanding public engagement globally, community engagement has become pivotal for the strengthening and renewal of democracy. This resource not only demonstrates the critical importance of community engagement and taking inclusive action – in particular, in global issues like climate action – but distils critical concepts and methods that underlie the very delivery of meaningful engagement.

So, whether you're looking for an introduction to the concept or a refresher, *Community Engagement 101* provides answers to fundamental questions that underlie engagement. Whether you're looking to understand community engagement practice or want to explore the concept as it relates to sustainable public decision-making for liveable neighbourhoods, regions cities and towns, this easy-to-navigate series is a go-to compendium.

What is Community Engagement?

Community engagement is based on the democratic idea that everyone who is affected by an issue that impacts their community should have a say in the decision-making around it. It, moreover, holds the promise that public participation can influence decisions that affect the provision of services, future visions and sustainability of our communities.

Although there is no commonly agreed to community engagement definition and the use of the term varies widely (sharing in notions of consultation, participation, collaboration and empowerment), community engagement captures its meaning in mutual decision-making. People, governments and organisations work collaboratively to create – and realise – sustainable visions for their community's future. For governments and organisations, it's about working with, and listening to, communities to build long term relationships and develop meaningful solutions to complex issues. By deepening these relationships, ideally, the value of inclusivity is central, where government entities create dialogue with the very diversity of their communities.

In recognising the needs and aspirations of all participants, community engagement promotes the idea that, through intentional interactions between government organisations and communities, community members can – and do – influence policy making. That is, community engagement's promise is to better

> **"Simply put, community engagement seeks to engage community to achieve sustainable outcomes, equitable decision-making processes, and deepen relationships and trust between government organisations and communities."**

engage community to help make better public decisions. It is, thereby, both an orientation toward the importance of community members' lived experience to influence interactions between government organisations and communities, and an approach that guides the process of those interactions.

Is community engagement the same as citizen participation and public participation?

At times interchangeable with citizen participation, community engagement differs primarily in the divergent roles that community members and public decision makers play. Community engagement requires intentional interactions between communities and public decision makers, whereas citizen participation is mobilised by – and for – citizens and community groups.

Public participation, on the other hand, takes into account the full range of activities that people undertake to shape policy outcomes – from community-led to state-sanctioned. Engaging with structures and organisational bodies of democracy, this includes everything from voting and lobbying to participating in demonstrations.

But although a political practice, public participation is a path to empowerment critical to well-functioning democracies – particularly relevant in the twenty-first century's declining democracy globally.

Increasingly, public participation has become vitally important with commitments to improve its role in policy-making globally. Indeed, the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development – created using unprecedented participation involving more than 7.5 million people from over 190 countries – embeds inclusive democratic participation in the Sustainable Development Goals.

"Community engagement requires intentional interactions between communities and public decision-makers."

Emphasis on the lived experience of community members taking a front seat and local knowledges inflecting decision-making processes, challenges a top-down approach to public decision-making. In demonstrating that community contribution matters, public participation challenges the linear, or one-way relationship between government organisations and communities and promotes productive, durable change through, amoung other things, deliberative dialogue. (In this way, public participation is important even if it doesn't directly influence policy decisions as it can produce new, localised knowledge that generates information that can shift government policy agendas.)

By contrast, community engagement provides participants with information they need to engage in a meaningful way with policy issues and communicates, via feedback, how their input affects public decisions. It builds and sustains relationships between communities and government entities into the future.

On a manifest level, traditional and digital engagement, or what we call digital-first engagement, implies the way we engage communities. Traditional, "in person" or what is commonly called "face to face" community engagement can take the form of citizen's juries, citizen's assemblies or public meetings and consultations, for instance. These connect people and build relationships in a hands-on environment while accessing information necessary for community members to have their say on the issues at hand.

Digital-first community engagement can include, among other things, participatory forums, online community panels and digital storytelling, enabling deeper questions to be asked of the issues at hand. While the opportunities of digital-first engagement approach are many – including a flexible environment, inclusion of a diversity of voices and expansive reach – both methods are essential to connect communities with decision-making processes.

At a more latent level, these differing types are often integrated in an engagement process that works within an engagement framework. Governments and organisations utilise engagement frameworks, or models, that use traditional and digital engagement within formal engagement processes. (This is different to citizen participation that utilises informal processes to voice opinions about policies.) Formal or 'state-sanctioned' participation initiatives invite the public to engage beyond voting – such as citizen's assemblies, citizen juries or participatory budgets. Although

"Community engagement provides participants with information they need to engage in a meaningful way."

partaking in the same goal – improving public services and projects – these differ from the types of activities created by citizens, residents and community members themselves through their shared identities and common interests. But, as we see when we ask, 'how do you engage communities?', formal initiatives don't preclude communities actively shaping processes and outcomes of public decisions in the improvement of provision of services for their community.

What are the types of community engagement?

On a manifest level, traditional and digital engagement, or what we call digital-first engagement, implies the way we engage communities. Traditional, "in person" or what is commonly called "face to face" community engagement can take the form of citizen's juries, citizen's assemblies or public meetings and consultations, for instance. These connect people and build relationships in a hands-on environment while accessing information necessary for community members to have their say on the issues at hand.

Digital-first community engagement can include, among other things, participatory forums, online community panels and digital storytelling, enabling deeper questions to be asked of the issues at hand. While the opportunities of digital-first engagement approach are many – including a flexible environment, inclusion of a diversity of voices and expansive reach – both methods are essential to connect communities with decision-making processes.

At a more latent level, these differing types are often integrated in an engagement process that works within an engagement framework. Governments and organisations utilise engagement frameworks, or models, that use traditional and digital engagement within formal engagement processes. (This is different to citizen participation that utilises informal processes to voice opinions about policies.) Formal or 'state-sanctioned' participation initiatives invite the public to engage beyond voting – such as citizen's assemblies, citizen juries or participatory budgets. Although partaking in the same goal – improving public services and projects – these differ from the types of activities created by citizens, residents and community members themselves through their shared identities and common interests. But, as we see when we ask, 'how do you engage communities?', formal initiatives don't preclude communities actively shaping processes and outcomes of public decisions in the improvement of provision of services for their community.

How Do You Engage Communities?

The question "how do you engage a community?" depends on the degree of influence given to the community in a decision-making process. It also depends on when engagement occurs during a policy development cycle.

True to its collaborative exchange, participants shape how they participate. Where traditional, top-down initiatives seek only to inform citizens on an arrived-at policy decision, the lack of attention to a relationship-based model for delivering public services is wanting – a point well recognised globally by current efforts to deepen and expand public participation. Community members are engaged when they play a meaningful role in both the decision-making process and the implementation of projects that affect them. Broadening the role of government organisations to include facilitator and collaborator, for instance, empowers locals and community members. Loosening the hold on a top-down approach also instils trust in community members to meaningfully engage in issues.

"Community members are engaged when they play a meaningful role in both the decision-making process and the implementation of projects that affect them."

What are community engagement models?

Governments and public decision makers who listen to local knowledge, where it feeds back into decisions, facilitate community ownership over outcomes. In this way, community engagement is often depicted as a continuum. This ranges from low-level engagement strategies, such as consultation, to high-level strategies such as community empowerment. Over the last fifty years, international public participation models have evolved to map engagement to show this influence. Sheree Arnstein's landmark Ladder of Citizen Participation, developed in 1969, while it continues to hold relevance, has been adapted variously to suggest engagement's evolving process-focus. (See for instance, the work of Marshall Ganz or Gideon Rosenblatt's The Engagement Pyramid.) More recently, Capire Consultancy's The Engagement Triangle stems the effect of a generic understanding and misinterpretation of engagement that occurs in organisations. Instead, it identifies desired outcomes based on overarching objectives of informing decisions, building capacity and strengthening relationships between organisations and communities.

How do governments engage communities?

The IAP2 Public Participation Spectrum, developed in the late 1990s, with updates by IAP2 Australasia in 2014, is one of the most utilised and applied of international public participation models to describe the level of citizen's involvement in decision-making processes. It explains the different levels of engagement that organisations can engage their communities, with the furthest right of the spectrum highlighting the greater community influence on decision-making. Each level holds out a different promise to the community to which decision makers are held accountable.

Integrating community engagement models into governance strategies, however, local governments utilise formal engagement processes. (This is different to citizen participation that utilises informal processes to voice opinions about policies.) Formal or 'state-sanctioned' participation initiatives invite the public to engage beyond voting – such as citizen's assemblies, citizen juries or participatory budgets. Although partaking in the same goal – improving public services and projects – these differ from those activities created by citizens, residents and community members themselves through their shared identities and common interests. What's more, formal initiatives don't preclude communities actively shaping processes and outcomes of public decisions in the improvement of provision of services for their community. They can also inform local government-led advocacy.

Reframing formal participation in efforts toward deliberative democracy, then, facilitates collaborative exchange. This can take the form of citizen assemblies or 21st century town hall meetings and other forms of e-democracy. For depending on when it occurs in any given project, community engagement doesn't preclude responding to a community-led approach. (While to-date most public participation occurs late in policy development cycle, some countries are testing "live" policy issues to deepen public engagement.)

How communities are engaged within a policy development cycle gives government organisations and public decision makers a chance to gain localised insight into community sentiments, values and concerns as well as an in depth view into what communities have to say about issues that affect their neighbourhoods, cities, towns and regions. It embodies and deepens the function democracy at the same time it underlines the question, why is community engagement important?

Why is Community Engagement Important?

With the rise in deepening and expanding public engagement globally, community engagement has become pivotal for well-functioning, twenty-first century democracies. Constructive relationships between communities and the institutions of government make community engagement not only desirable, but necessary and viable as it is likely to lead to more equitable, sustainable public decisions and improve the liveability of local communities. Where traditional, executive-led approaches are ineffective, community engagement is important in its collaborative approach to the design and/or delivery of services. For the complexity of issues in any given community – where traditional approaches have been ineffective if non-inclusive in the extreme – community engagement enables better understanding of communities' needs and aspirations.

Community engagement builds and sustains cohesive communities

Community engagement is, primarily, part of a dialogue where organisations and communities can make decisions to create social capital.

"Community engagement enables better understanding of communities' needs and aspirations."

Compelling stories of community engagement impacts range from creating (or indeed preventing) change in local policies and service provisions that not only enrich everyday lives and liveability of communities, but help shape and envision a community's future, bringing with it not only wider societal change but global impacts.

Community engagement leads to improved outcomes

Community engagement can lead to improved outcomes for communities when government organisations and public decision-making entities seek out the aspirations, concerns and values of communities, who, in turn, share their aspirations, concerns and values with governing entities. Incorporated into decision-making processes, public decision makers are better informed and better able to meet community needs.

Establishing long standing, effective partnerships between government organisations and communities, too, results in a greater sense of community ownership and an improved uptake of services as they are tailored to the unique aspirations of the community.

Community engagement ensures access and community empowerment

Meaningful, inclusive community engagement is critical to community well being.

Understood through the values of access and inclusivity, where community members are informed and educated on issues at hand, locals are able to contribute meaningfully to engagement the capacity to shape those activities. Building on the ideas of empowerment and participation, people's wellbeing involves participating meaningfully in all aspects of one's life. Community engagement, then, ensures that community members have access to valued social settings and activities, feel that they are able to contribute meaningfully to those activities, and develop functional capabilities that enable them to participate fully.

By including diverse voices, usually marginalised or overlooked voices are actively empowered within their community to participate in decision-making that affects their everyday lives.

> **"Community engagement is important as it takes action to influence stakeholders with government, political or funding power to implement public projects and policies that primarily benefit individual communities and drive social change."**

Community engagement helps local governments to promote sustainable decisions

Community engagement helps governments improve the efficiency, legitimacy and transparency of their decision-making. By embracing and encouraging participation, it enables policy makers to make more informed decisions by engaging with, and carefully mapping out the needs, opinions and visions of local communities on issues that matter to them. It promotes sustainable decisions by recognising and communicating the needs and interests of all participants – including decision makers. This increases acceptance of decisions and community commitment to outcomes as local knowledge from diverse groups shapes and creates inclusive, effective solutions. The flow on effect is increased trust in organisations and governance to make better public decisions.

This is especially vital given the declining trust in governments worldwide, which, coupled with the Smart City agenda, creates an opportunity for community engagement to deliver a transformative form of continuous engagement between citizens and governments.

Community engagement drives social transformation

With an emphasis on collaboration and the promise of influence on decision-making, community engagement drives social transformation. It promotes advocacy that not only works to raise awareness, but passionate, locally-informed voices can be heard – especially during election time. As voters, communities have the power to make their voices heard. And elections represent a significant opportunity to drive change.

Advocacy campaigns are at their most effective when local governments, municipalities and councils activate communities, mobilising on issues that impact their everyday lives. For it is in the local, placed-based arena that community members can have their most direct impact on policy.

Traditionally, local government advocacy priorities have been determined by executive-led approach – essentially, without community input (and often buoyed by third-party research and data at times, leading to advocacy campaigns that worked to benefit external agencies). Community engagement is important as it takes action to influence stakeholders with government, political or funding power to implement public projects and policies that primarily benefit individual communities and drive social change.

Community engagement is critical to deepening democracies

Depending on the types of community engagement, and level of influence given over to communities in a public decision-making process, community engagement strives towards deliberative democracy which facilitates a collaborative exchange regarding a set of policies or actions.

Researchers have observed a pronounced expansion in community organising since the mid 1980s – where they have increasingly become a locus of engagement during governments' deregulation of power. Broadly speaking, since the 1990s, we have witnessed a rapid expansion in formal, state-based initiatives to facilitate public participation in decision-making, where communities are invited to engage beyond voting.

The attendant mistrust or loss of faith in government and information on public policy through traditional and social news channels walks hand in hand with the shift from top-down governance to more horizontally organised governments. Here, all stakeholders of public policy projects – local governments and organisations, businesses, residents and communities – are brought into the decision-making process, nurturing the very democratic idea of community engagement that people should have a say over decisions that impact their everyday lives.

Increasingly, over recent years, through digital democracy and digital participation in open government and e-democracy, digitisation has spread into policy and decision-making. This is coupled with wider social transformations as there is a call for transparency around public decisions and residents and communities are more motivated to weigh in on policies affecting their cities, towns and neighbourhoods.

This is not to overlook the unbridled enthusiasm for technology that has, paradoxically, fuelled the current digital mistrust of tech and big data and the unreliability of information via social media. But, governments now must create intentional interactions that facilitates community engagement. In this way, digital-first engagement has a vital role. While the benefits of online community engagement are manifold in the current global state of digitisation, digital-first engagement supports a continuous democracy and can enhance transparency and trust. For, primarily, digital-first engagement is more efficient – giving community leaders added opportunity to focus on community issues.

Why should we use community engagement?

Community engagement increases the visibility and understanding of issues and empowers communities to have their say over decisions that affect their lives, their towns, cities and neighbourhoods.

It provides opportunities for community members to contribute to public decision-making processes – and informing and educating communities on policy issues that impact their everyday lives. Through feedback, community engagement enables government and public decision-making organisations to listen and, in turn, demonstrate the impact of community contribution. Community engagement, then, builds deeper, stronger and more trusting relationships between public organisations and communities.

Benefits of Online Community Engagement

Generally speaking, community engagement is built on the democratic idea that everyone who is affected by an issue that impacts their community should have a say in the decision-making around it. Although there's no commonly agreed definition, essentially community engagement is about mutual decision-making, where people, governments and organisations work collaboratively to create sustainable visions for their community's future. For governments and organisations, it's about working with and listening to communities to forge long term relationships and develop meaningful solutions to complex issues.

But, while many models and frameworks of public participation shape how to engage communities, much can depend on how these conversations happen, where they take place, and how they best include the diverse range of voices that have a stake in them.

Online community engagement brings added dimensions and benefits to decision-making, building trust between governments and citizens and empowering community ownership in the shared responsibility for improving services, projects and programs.

Why we engage online?

Where traditional, face to face engagement has limited participants, online community engagement enables more people to have their say, at their convenience. A dedicated digital engagement space beyond the limitations of social media – with strident measures of data security that combat increasing community mistrust of social media – ensures everyone has safe access to make meaningful contributions to issues impacting their everyday life.

Online engagement in the planning stages of a project can facilitate more focussed outcomes. It can also minimise budgets that confront geographical confines particular to face to face engagement. And, unliketraditional engagement methods, it provides unparalleled opportunities to dive deeper into conversations beyond the immediate issue at hand.

It also brings diverse groups together, including hard to reach communities, providing access to often neglected perspectives and bringing marginalised voices into the conversation.

Engaging Unrepresented Groups

Online community engagement gives everyone a chance to be heard and builds greater social cohesion.

Unrepresented groups are often missing from engagement cohorts. Traditional, or face to face engagement activities can often be dominated by small groups of typically frequent participants, where issues can become prey to the same sounding voices. Other voices can go unheard or, more crucially, are missing from the conversation altogether. Equally, not everyone can make it to public meetings or speak up without hesitation in offline forums.

Online engagement provides a safe and accessible place for people to contribute to the conversation free from the limitations of a public forum. It brings diverse communities together including, hard to reach and disadvantaged groups, enabling marginalised and often excluded groups to be brought into the decision-making process and the mainstream of the community.

Informed decision-making

Making sure people have their say, and are listened to, and involving the people most affected, leads to decisions that are more likely to be legitimate, effective and sustainable.

Building positive relationships between and within communities has a flow on effect of strengthening relations between communities, governments and organisations to engender better informed decision-making. The reach and accessibility of online engagement provides insights into the needs, priorities and capabilities of local communities and ensures investment is based on the expressed needs of the community. Through improved, open communications, too, it makes for better policy making. In short, for better, more informed decisions.

In the legitimate community support for decisions, moreover, online participation allows support for a decision to be developed with stakeholders before it is formally taken up. Embedded in the planning stages, it addresses risk management, tests project assumptions and scope, as well as proposed solutions. It gives due consideration for all stakeholders involved.

Community Ownership

Online engagement allows for continuous conversations between communities, organisations and governments which, in turn, builds positive relationships.

While there are challenges to selecting an online engagement platform, the provision of continuous engagement is advantageous in building trust between governments, organisations and the communities they represent. Counteracting the increasing lack of trust that characterises relationships between governments and citizens, open, continuous communications and deliberative methods/participatory processes ensures better responsiveness to the priorities and needs identified by local people. Continuous engagement activities can drive open communications and maintain regular contact unavailable to traditional engagement activities. This, in turn, increases trust between governments and the provision of services and programs based on community-determined needs and priorities.

Organisations, too, can tap into online community engagement to drive organisational change and bring people together to foster better collaboration. It can build participation, community knowledge and feedback into projects as a vital and sustainable way of doing things.

Debunks Myths

Online engagement dispels myths and tackles misinformation through directing people to information and resources to build community capacity. This creates a dialogue where diverse views can be given space and people, governments and organisations can gain insight into different perspectives and positions.

Here, tackling misconceptions around using digitally collected data, including myths around security and safety, further builds transparency.

With a dedicated online engagement space, moreover, organisations can ensure that the community is provided with high-quality authorised information and opportunities to ask questions. This is particularly crucial when there are sensitive or complex issues at hand.

Unearths Real Issues

Online community engagement can bring out the issues that really matter to the community

While an organisation may approach a set of issues in a certain way, they may not always be able to see the related issues that may be less visible but equally, if not more, important to the community. Opening the conversation up can allow these underlying priorities and experiences to come to the forefront and inform better decisions for all involved. This can mean looking beyond the survey.

Engaging online allows for a wider, more diverse range of views, which provides new, relevant knowledge to contribute to decision-making. Unpacking issues in greater detail, it paints a clearer picture of what the community wants and pertinent local issues. With tools and opportunities for a more collaborative, deeper dialogue, digital engagement fosters trust and unearths underlying tensions around issues and competing priorities for stakeholders.

GRANICUS

granicus.com