

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

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Table of Contents

Introduction	3
Main body	3
Community engagement	3
Stakeholder engagement analysis	5
Ways to engage community members	6
Community participation, collaboration, diversity and inclusion	8
Conclusion	8
References	9

Introduction

The current essay aims to explore and highlight various perspectives of community engagement in terms of its nature, benefits and challenges. Apart from that, a critical analysis of how challenges faced affect the communication and collaboration with different stakeholders is also conducted. Different channels and tools for effectively engaging internal and external stakeholders are also assessed. The essay applies a wide variety of credible sources from academic literature and experts' analyses. These are interpreted and used with the purpose of critically examining the importance of engaging different stakeholders and how this process can be efficiently implemented, if necessary. Community engagement is a topic which has continuously increased in terms of interest and consideration, as it is perceived as one of the main tools for maximising social welfare and achieving a better and more sustainable way of life in a closed society. The current essay explored various perspectives of this topic and analyses different aspects of community engagement literature which are considered as relevant.

Main body

Community engagement

By definition, 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 wellbeing of those people (Walker, 2008). Community engagement is considered to be one of the main tools for achieving environmental and behavioural changes on a local level which aim to improve the welfare of the community and its members (Walker, 2008). Very often community engagement operates on the basis of different partnerships and coalitions which help the preservation of resources, their efficient utilisation and influence social systems with the aim of improving overall community welfare (Walker, 2008).

According to academic literature, the main goals of community engagement are to build trust, ensure new resources and allies for different projects, achieve more effective cooperation and communication between different parties involved in various projects and improving overall welfare of community members (Walker, 2008).

The benefits of effective and strong community engagement can be quite diverse in practice. One of the most commonly referred advantage is that project awareness sufficiently increases which, in turn, leads to higher effectiveness, better chance of success and more potential resources and assistance from various stakeholder groups involved (Walker, 2008). In addition to that, the effective community engagement allows different individuals to advocate for their ideas (Walker, 2008). In case these ideas are perceived as good, through better community engagement they are likely to receive more support and have a greater chance for success. Community engagement also results in a larger pool of ideas, advice, assistance and guidance based on stakeholders' expertise, knowledge, capabilities and experiences (Walker, 2008). This results in making more informed decisions and complete projects in a better, more effective way. Community engagement also allows a better development of project agenda and redefining project focus in case it is needed. Effective engagement of stakeholders provides the opportunity to reach a wider and more diverse audience; thereby, leading to its better education and informing. Empirical evidence also shows that, when people are engaged, they tend to be more receptive to project outcome and willing to contribute to forming long-term sustainable relationships (Walker, 2008).

Despite the numerous benefits arising from effective community engagement, this process is also associated with several complex challenges. One of the main issues in community engagement is considered to be related to adequate resourcing. When community projects are considered, it is often the case that administration staff members do not have the resources and/or time to effectively implement an engagement strategy, leading to lower audience reach and involvement of stakeholders (McCabe, 2007). The need for flexibility and creating an opportunity for responding proactively and reactively to community needs is also a challenge for more organisations involved in such projects (Gosman, 2013). It should also be pointed out that community engagement should be planned and implemented in a way, so that it allows active feedback to be provided by different stakeholder groups; thereby, leading to their more active involvement and a better pool of ideas. Another crucial challenge faced by different entities aiming at reaching high levels of community engagement is related to the need for accessibility, equity, diversity and representativeness of all stakeholders related to the project (Gosman, 2013). Community projects are also associated with a high diversity and variety of stakeholders which need to be involved and this increases the complexity of finding a unified channel and approach that can fit to all of their expectations (Weger et al., 2018). All these challenges and many more lead to greater complexities of addressing various needs of

stakeholders and the emergence of greater risks for different projects and required collaboration between involved parties.

Stakeholder engagement analysis

By definition, stakeholders include any group or individual who can affect or be affected by a certain project (Ojo, 2020). This would include all parties which have any form of interest in the particular community project. Stakeholder engagement includes the processes of influencing a variety of outcomes through consultation, communication, negotiation and building sustainable relationships with local community members (Ojo, 2020). In order to effectively engage different stakeholders, it is crucial to identify them according to their role, influence, interest and type.

In general, stakeholders can be divided into two main groups, namely being internal and external. Internal stakeholders are the ones which have a direct interest in the project (Ojo, 2020). In the case of a community project, these would include staff members, subcontractors, partners and others. External stakeholders are those, who are not directly involved in the project, but may affect or be affected by it (Ojo, 2020). In the case of community projects, examples include members of local community, academics, non-profit organisations, media, blockers, marginalised stakeholders, supporters and others.

Blockers are all individuals or organisations which are trying to prevent or restrain the project for a certain reason. Supporters are the ones who encourage the successful completion of community projects. Marginalised stakeholders include all individuals and groups of individuals who lack self-representation and they are ignored, mistreated or discriminated against (Ojo, 2020). Engaging both internal and external stakeholders is essential for the successful completion of community projects, as this would lead to better collaboration, more effective communication and better overall final outcome.

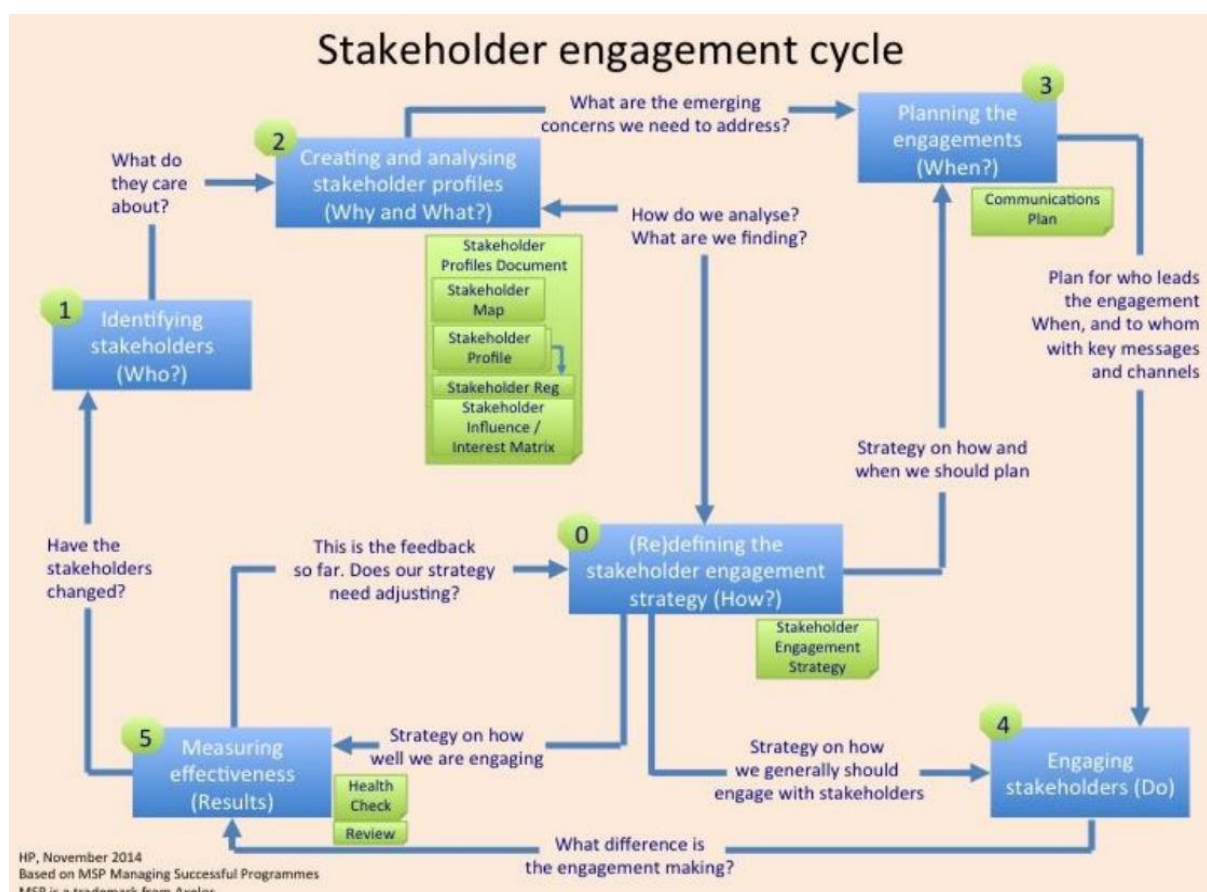
Engaging stakeholders can vary in terms of format, aims, tools used for increasing awareness and intended outcome. It can range from truly committed stakeholders who are willing to contribute to better final outcome of projects to information sharing and increasing awareness in regard to different perspectives of the process (Ojo, 2020). Engaging stakeholders is considered to be effective and successful when parties are involved and decision-making is informed and shared. For the purposes of critical analysis, it should be noted that, in order for

stakeholder engagement to fully contribute to community projects' completion, it should be based on two-way communication and interactions between various parties involved.

Ways to engage community members

The stakeholder engagement cycle is based on five main stages and elements, all of which should be properly addressed in order for the process to be effectively and successfully completed. It can be graphically illustrated as on the figure below. The process starts with identifying both internal and external stakeholders, analysing their profiles and power, planning engagement channels and tools, which are considered as most appropriate to be used, engaging stakeholders and measuring effectiveness on a regular basis, so that stakeholder engagement strategy can be redefined if necessary (Ojo, 2020).

Figure 1 – Stakeholder engagement cycle



Source: Ojo (2020)

There are different ways and techniques which can be used to engage community project stakeholders. Some of the most popular include meetings, the use of different platforms as well

as individual or group interviews (Christens and Zeldin, 2011). One of the most commonly applied methods for engaging different stakeholders is to organise various meetings where parties interested in or affected by the project can share their views, opinion, advice, recommendations or share concerns. In this way, the pool of ideas and alternative solutions to a problem would be larger and decision-making would be more objective and informed, resulting in better results and final outcome (Christens and Zeldin, 2011).

Another way and common tool used for engaging communities and stakeholders is associated with virtual platforms of different sorts. During the last decade, a very popular mechanism to engage stakeholders in different community projects has been the development and promotion of mobile apps or digital platforms allowing society to share an opinion, signal for an issue, provide information, participate in surveys and others. (Steinmetz et al., 2020). Such platforms also serve as a channel of communication through which different entities, organisations and responsible bodies can provide detailed and in-depth information to citizens and other interested parties. There are many examples of local municipalities and councils which have developed mobile apps and online web platforms effectively serving as a mean for communication between local community and government bodies.

According to academics like Steinmetz et al. (2020), social media is also a crucial channel of communication and stakeholder engagement, especially since the pandemic outbreak. During the recent years, there has been a trend towards the development of ‘smarter’ cities through infrastructure, city planning processes, and smart city knowledge exchange (Steinmetz et al., 2020). Digital channels of communication, such as social media, are currently widely used for stakeholder engagement for various community projects (Steinmetz et al., 2020). Many municipalities, councils and regional bodies have pages on social media like Facebook and Instagram, where they encourage discussions, involvement of different stakeholders and exchange of ideas and recommendations for improving social welfare in the region. Platforms like social media are used as tools for promoting social interaction, formation of trust, more sustainable relationships and greater collaboration between different parties (Steinmetz et al., 2020). Interviews with individuals and focus groups are also used as a tool for engagement and obtaining direct feedback from interested parties. All these tools, if properly used, lead to better project outcome and improved performance.

Community participation, collaboration, diversity and inclusion

Participation, collaboration, diversity and inclusion are independent dimensions of public engagement. Participation is associated with increasing input for decisions (Quick and Feldman, 2011). This means that stakeholder engagement would aim at increasing the contribution of different parties to the specific project under consideration. For example, the building of a homeless people shelter in a neighbourhood may benefit from considering the opinion of people living nearby and their recommendations for addressing different concerns.

Inclusion, on the other hand, is a term describing the connections made not only between the points of view of different individuals and organisations, but across issues, sectors and engagement efforts as well (Quick and Feldman, 2011). Diversity is a practice of engaging different parties without excluding or discriminating any of them.

Collaboration is also a main pillar of community engagement and should be encouraged by project practices and efforts. An example of collaboration and diversity would be creating support groups for disadvantaged minorities, consisting of different parties, such as experts, councillors, local government, community representatives, people who have experienced the same issues in the past, media and many more. As evident, these elements should be aimed at, so that community projects and engagement are maximised in terms of performance and outcome.

Conclusion

To sum up, community engagement is one of the main factors of influence on project completion, effectiveness and achieved outcomes. There are many benefits obtained by effective community engagement, including more informed decision-making, greater collaboration, increasing awareness, better representation of minorities and many more. The involvement of internal and external stakeholders is crucial for improved social welfare and more efficient project management. There are many ways and channels which can be used to engage various stakeholder groups. The most common ones include meetings, the use of various digital platforms and interviews. Considering the latest trends and preferences of society members, it is recommended that digital platforms and social media are prioritised. In addition to all that, participation, collaboration, diversity and inclusion should be encouraged given their status as key pillars for successful project implementation.

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