

Community Engagement

Penka Murdzheva

Student ID 2122606

Module code LCBB4002

Lecturer Anita Nan

Table of Contents

Introduction.....	3
Main body	3
Community engagement – why it is important?	3
Stakeholder engagement	6
Tools for community members’ engagement.....	8
Community participation, collaboration, diversity and inclusion.....	10
Conclusion	10
References.....	12

Introduction

Community engagement is one of the fundamental pillars of contemporary democratic process and a crucial driver of social and community welfare. This is one of the reasons why the concept should be comprehended and understood well. The purpose of this essay is to investigate the nature of community engagement and examine various ways in which it can be achieved. This is done by looking at the definition, benefits and challenges of the concept, as well as assessing various perspectives of stakeholders and the channels which can be used to reach and engage them. The importance of community participation, collaboration, diversity and inclusion is also addressed. The complexity of modern lifestyle and contemporary project management requires a better understanding of the importance of all these concepts, as well as the tools which can be implemented to improve their use. The current essay is perceived as a useful foundation for assessing the different aspects of these terms and their contribution to better social welfare.

Main body

Community engagement – why it is important?

The academic definition of the term ‘community engagement’ is focused on the process of working collaboratively with and through groups of people affiliated by geographic proximity, special interest or similar situations to address issues affecting their wellbeing (ATSDR, 2011). The main aims of community engagement generally include building trust, enlisting resources, developing more effective communication and improving overall welfare and contribute to the transformation of successful projects into long-term sustainable collaborations (ATSDR, 2011). Simply put, community engagement is aiming to the

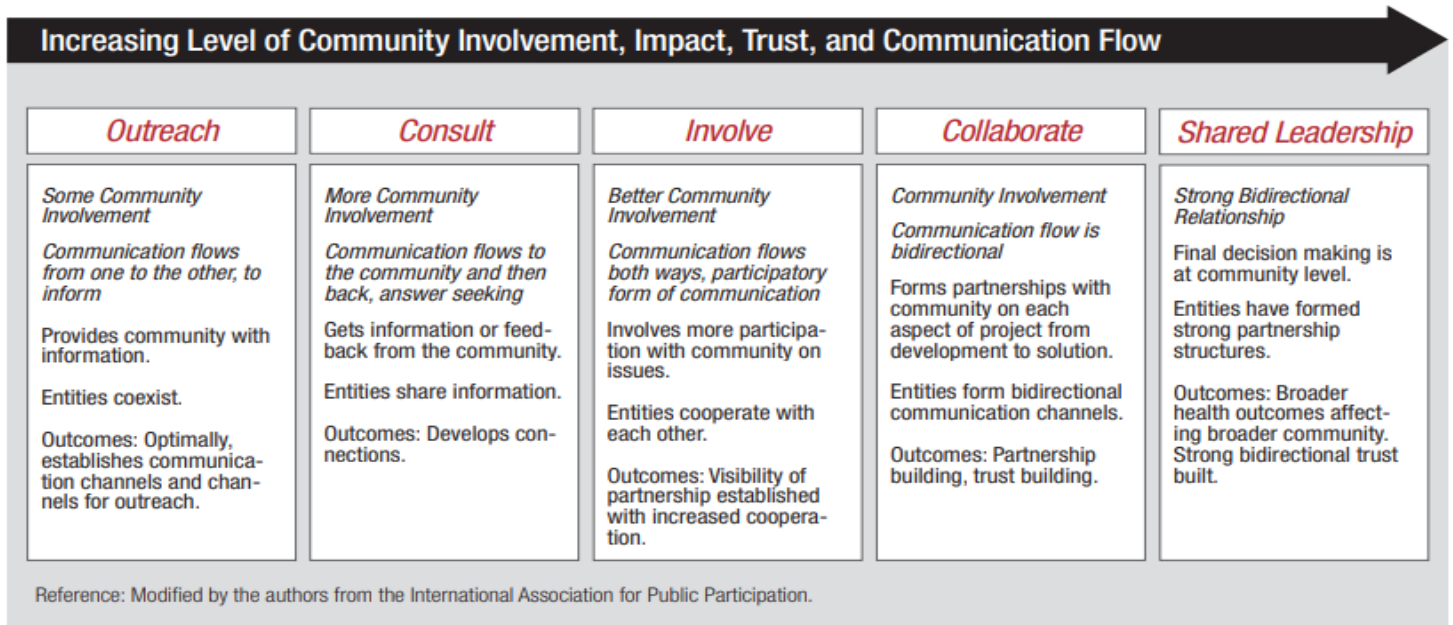
improving of quality and standard life of community members in a given area through the use of both political and non-political means (GovOS, 2022). Community engagement is often referred to as civic participation and aims at making a positive difference in a local community (GovOS, 2022).

Community engagement includes various forms of contribution, including activism, volunteer work, tutoring, donating, environmentalism and many more (GovOS, 2022). Examples of community engagement can be extremely diverse and different, but some basic examples include volunteering at a local shelter, maintaining a community garden, advocating for community problems or solutions, creating support groups, voting on elections, attending council meetings and many more (GovOS, 2022).

The growing commitment to community engagement is justified by the increasing number and variety of different benefits which are obtained by its successful implementation. Communities with high levels of engagement tend to be featured with higher standards of living, improved welfare, fewer problems and challenges faced and better collaboration between different parties and elements of the social system (GovOS, 2022). Even in case of significant challenges faced, communities with higher engagement levels are perceived to be better prepared to deal with them and more effective in finding alternative solutions.

Community engagement can be illustrated as a continuum illustrating its evolution with time. Effective community engagement evolves from outreach and basic participation to strong relationships and shared leadership between different parties involved in various projects (ATSDR, 2011).

Figure 1 – Community engagement continuum



Source: ATSDR (2011)

High levels of community engagement bring a wide variety of benefits. It has been identified and revealed that effective community engagement results in positive impact in regard to nine important perspectives of relevant community projects. These include agenda, design and delivery, implementation and change, ethics, knowledge and skills of the public, enhanced understanding of academic partners, easier participation, community organisation and the reception of the public (ATSDR, 2011).

Community engagement increases the likelihood that different projects and solutions would be better perceived by the public. This is the case due to the assumption that citizens and other stakeholders have participated in their development and adjustments and thus, are more likely to accept them (PennState, 2022). The engagement of different stakeholders also leads to the creation of more effective solutions as knowledge, skills, capabilities and expertise are shared and there are more ideas and advices which are taken into account (PennState, 2022).

Furthermore, high levels of community engagement also lead to improved knowledge and skills in problem solving (PennState, 2022). It creates better awareness and understanding of the certain issue, its perspectives and alternative solutions along with their impact. Improved comprehension of the problem allows different parties to better understand the causes, as well as different perspectives and nuances, which improves decision-making and perception of selected solutions. High levels of community engagement also empower and integrate people

from various backgrounds (PennState, 2022). Groups of people and minorities, who are generally under-represented, are provided with many opportunities for inclusion which also contributes to higher level of advocacy and diversity.

Community engagement also brings the advantage of creating local networks of community members (PennState, 2022). Greater involvement of different interested parties tends to result in more people willing to collaborate and work together towards finding a solution to a certain problem. Community engagement also allows more insightful and in-depth discussion of concerns of different parties affected by the project (PennState, 2022). As a result of all this, community engagement increases trust in community organisations and governance entities (PennState, 2022). It increases teamwork and collaboration which, in turn, improve communication, perception and comprehension of various problems.

However, very often, achieving high levels of community engagement is rather challenging. The top five challenges faced in this regard include:

-  Engaging and maintaining community involvement;
-  Finding ways to address differences between different stakeholder groups and their interests;
-  Working effectively with non-traditional communities;
-  Addressing evolving needs and expectations of parties involved;
-  Overcoming competing priorities and institutional differences.

These challenges can be addressed by effective strategies for community engagement and detailed in-depth continuous assessment of different needs of various stakeholders, identified by ensuring two-way communication with each of them (Liang and Sandmann, 2015).

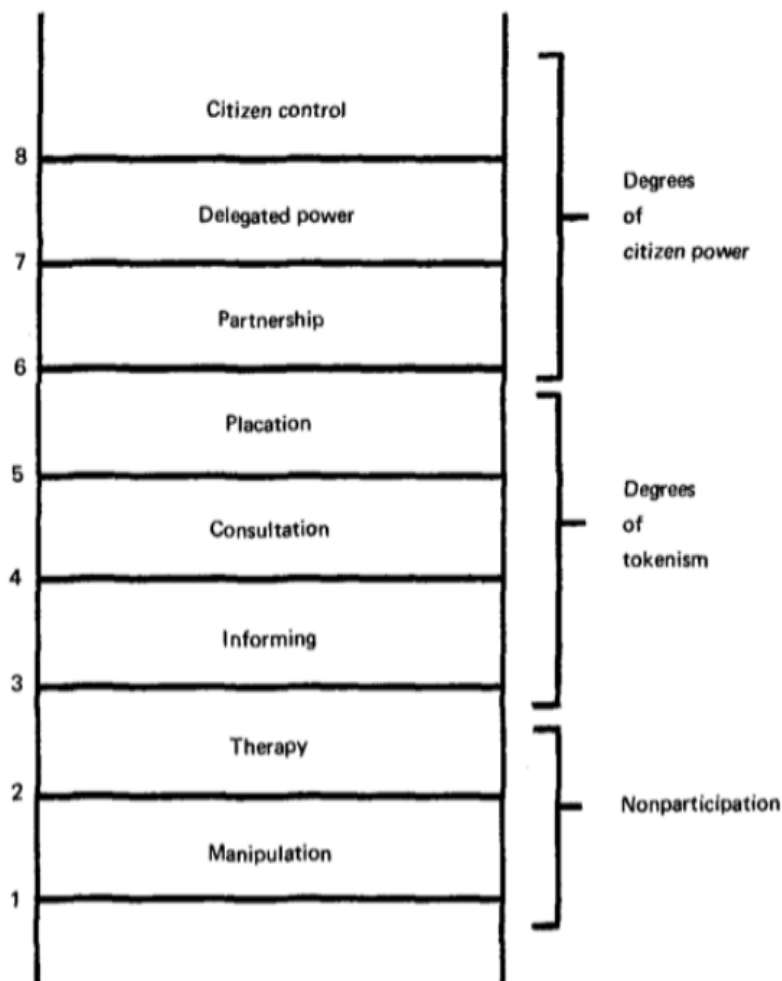
Stakeholder engagement

Community-level stakeholders include all individuals and groups of individuals who have an interest in the project, as well as those who can affect or be affected by it (McGrath and Whitty, 2017). Stakeholders can be generally divided into internal and external. Internal stakeholder groups are the ones, who are directly related to the project completion, such as builders, other contractors, project managers, regulatory bodies, initiators, staff members and others. External stakeholders include all organisations, groups and individuals, who are not directly involved in the project completion, but can affect/be affected by it or are interested in

it for a certain purpose (McGrath and Whitty, 2017). Examples include supporters, opposers (a.k.a. blockers), marginalised stakeholders (under-represented or discriminated groups), media, the general public, local community, etc.

Identifying and analysing stakeholders is essential for achieving high levels of engagement and inclusion, as they allow the development of a more effective strategy for reaching different interested parties. According to the theory of participation ladder, shown on the next figure, citizens and community members are most involved when they are allowed and encouraged to impose control and to contribute to the project in a certain way (Milnar, 2014). On the contrary, stakeholders are least motivated to be engaged in the levels of manipulation and therapy, which are the stages occurring when people in power seek to educate or ‘cure’ community participants, prohibiting them from providing feedback or participate directly (Milnar, 2014).

Figure 2 – Participation ladder



Source: Milnar (2014)

When people in power decide to inform, consult or placate community members, they are allowed to have a voice, but this is a token voice – stakeholder can share an opinion, concern or recommendation but there is no guarantee that decision-makers would take it into consideration (Milnar, 2014). As a result, it is so important for stakeholders to be actually involved in the community project, so that collaboration and benefits are maximised.

Tools for community members' engagement

Effective community engagement practices are a driver for higher participation and collaboration, leading to better performance and final outcome of community projects and social welfare. Meaningful engagement, which is based on effective two-way communication between the public, institutions and other stakeholders, is a key for building trust and lasting collaborations and relationships. There is no unique approach for reaching and engaging

different stakeholders due to their diversity, various interests and agenda. However, there are many tools which can be used for engaging audience and encouraging it to contribute to improving standard of living of local communities.

One of the ways to engage communities is through organising public meetings. Whether they would be face-to-face or via digital channels, public meetings are among the common tools used to discuss concerns of communities and engage different stakeholders. One of the most common formats of meetings is the organisation of public hearings, in which different interested parties can share their views on the matter under discussion (MRSC, 2022). One of the main challenges faced in using this format refers to the need to deal with conflicts and disruptions during the meetings, as usually, the agenda and interests of various parties differ (MRSC, 2022). In order to avoid conflicts and ensure contributed collaboration, organisers need to address this risk and prepare a plan for action in case of occurrence.

Polling tolls and surveys are also very common tools for engaging different stakeholders. They allow responsible entities to gather valuable insights and opinions of various interested parties and thus, use this data in the decision-making process (MRSC, 2022). This allows the public to express their views in a more systematic way, which can then be easily analysed and integrated in consideration of various issues and project perspectives. Usually, polls and surveys are anonymous which further increase the honesty of replies and credibility of results.

Open houses, workshops and forums are also convenient and engaging gatherings which allow visitors to discuss different aspects of the topic under consideration. Those events are usually facilitated by responsible entities and encourage participation of local community and other stakeholders. Due to their nature, these are perceived to be more attractive for various parties of interest, which improves the reach of intended audience groups (MRSC, 2022).

Interviews with individuals and focus groups are also a commonly applied tool for reaching high levels of community engagement. This method allows for better understanding of the unique needs and interests of various parties; thereby, offering a better insight and more detailed information which can be used for reference by decision makers (MRSC, 2022).

During the last years, especially after COVID-19, many authorities increased their preference towards social media and digital platforms as channels of communication for engaging communities and other stakeholder groups. Local governments have embraced social media

platforms like Twitter and Facebook, in their efforts to reach larger audiences and encourage more parties to participate in their projects (MRSC, 2022). Due to the vast increase of social media penetration and use, this turns out to be a very effective strategy. Nowadays, local authorities use such platforms for informing the public about local events, provide news and other information, conduct polls, address residents' concerns, provoke discussions, showcase engaging content and many more (MRSC, 2022). Mobile apps and digital websites are also increasing in popularity and many local governments are already using such solutions to encourage citizens and other parties to involve more in various activities aiming to improve social welfare in the area.

Community participation, collaboration, diversity and inclusion

Community engagement efforts are also aiming at achieving higher participation, collaboration, diversity and inclusion. It has already been assessed that participation of the public tends to be different depending on the tools used to engage stakeholders and the power for action provided to them. As it has also been noted, collaboration and cooperation between different parties of interest is also essential for the effective implementation of projects and their maximised outcome. Engagement efforts, however, should also address the need for diversity and inclusion.

Diversity is related to the need for addressing various different groups without discriminating audience in terms of social categories, demographics, economic status or any other feature (MRSC, 2022). Inclusion is associated with treating everyone fairly and respectfully, providing equal access to opportunities and resources and allowing all interested parties equal chances for contribution (MRSC, 2022). An example of diversity and inclusion would be to organise a public hearing regarding the setting up of a local farmer's market and inviting representatives of all stakeholder groups to share their views and opinions on the topic.

Conclusion

In conclusion, community engagement is very important for increasing social welfare of local communities. It provides many benefits, but imposes some challenges to authorities as well, mainly arising from the difference in agendas and interests of various stakeholders. One of the most appropriate ways to address currently faced challenges is to use a diverse range of tools for engaging different stakeholders (e.g. public hearings and social media), as well as

make project-related decisions in a way, so that community participation, collaboration, diversity and inclusion are ensured. For this purpose, it is recommended that responsible authorities emphasise on detailed identification of stakeholder groups and their needs, as well as the use of digital channels of communication, such as platforms and social media, which are highly preferred nowadays by the majority of parties.

References

ATSDR (2011) *Community Engagement*, [online] Available:

https://www.atsdr.cdc.gov/communityengagement/pdf/PCE_Report_508_FINAL.pdf

[Accessed: 31 August 2022]

GovOS (2022) *What is Community Engagement?* [online] Available:

<https://govos.com/blog/what-is-community-engagement/> [Accessed: 31 August 2022]

Liang, J. and Sandmann, L. (2015) Leadership for Community Engagement – a Distributed Leadership Perspective, *Journal of Higher Education Outreach and Engagement*, Vol. 19(1), pp. 35-65.

Loader, B., Vromen, A. and Xenos, M. (2014) The Network Young Citizen: Social Media, Political Participation and Civic Engagement, *Information, Communication & Society*, Vol. 17(2), pp. 143-150.

McGrath, S. and Whitty, S. (2017) Stakeholder Defined, *International Journal of Managing Projects in Business*, Vol. 10(4), pp. 721-748.

Milnar, S. (2014) *Community Engagement and Participation in Collective Impact Initiatives*, [online] Available:

https://epublications.marquette.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1070&context=cps_professional [Accessed: 30 August 2022]

MRSC (2022) *Community Engagement Resources*, [online] Available:

<https://mrsc.org/Home/Explore-Topics/Governance/Engagement/Community-Engagement-Resources.aspx> [Accessed: 31 August 2022]

PennState (2022) *Why Community Engagement Matters*, [online] Available:

<https://aese.psu.edu/research/centers/cecd/engagement-toolbox/engagement/why-community-engagement-matters> [Accessed: 31 August 2022]