

Community Engagement

What's it all about?

Why do it?

Over the past decade new life has been breathed into ideas of 'engaging with communities', 'collaboration', 'partnership' and 'joint working'. Governments hope that this will enhance policies to reduce social and fiscal inequalities, and ultimately poverty, by fostering social inclusion and engendering a sense of community (Centre for Urban and Community Research 2005).

Concepts of community

'In reality, communities are not always comfortable homogenous entities. They are crosscut by a variety of divisions – race, gender, and class – and contain a multitude of groups whose interests may conflict with each other. In the most divided communities, these conflicts may be played out violently or through such behaviour as racial harassment' .Hawton et al (1999).

Problems of Community Engagement

- Work patterns
- Growth of suburbia
- Commercial television
- Generational change

(Putnam 2000)

Community benefits

- Gain wider access to public, social and/or political participation.
- Be informed by research and development that are closer to key social realities.
- Policy recommendations being based upon a commitment to the common good.
- Assistance in building community capacity and wellbeing.

Organisational benefits

- Develops a network of social relationships of trust, outside and inside the organisation.
- Provides contexts for research and development that are closer to key social realities.
- Provides the organisation with a higher public profile in a manner which emphasises its distinctiveness: concern for ethics and social justice, for the community, for engagement with society.
- Social cohesion is an important political issue and attracts funding. Community Engagement is ideally placed to be able to make a submission for such grants.

Government initiated community engagement would seem to have two clear aims:

- to address specific local problems and
- to involve people in identifying local problems and solutions and build their capacity to work in partnership with government agencies and programs

- *However, participation doesn't just happen, it is initiated and works best when a number of different interests willingly come together, formally or informally to achieve some common purpose (Wilcox 1994)*

- It's More Than Talk

Listen, Learn and Act

A New Model of Public Engagement

(Province of New Brunswick, Canada)

■ e-CE

The benefits of a free, globally available and rapidly expanding communication network awaits for the next generation of practitioners who dare to challenge the traditional approaches to citizen engagement. (de Percy 2008)

Conclusion

- Sustainability
- Reciprocity
- Relevance
- Reflection

Genuine engagement moves beyond the level of mere service and allows the opportunity for societal response to help redefine the nature of the problem itself and perhaps forges new solutions.