



NUMBER FIVE

Community participation in theory and practice

Why community participation?

Increasingly, community participation (or engagement or involvement or consultation) is seen as holding the answer to disadvantage. The idea is that by involving people in community groups and volunteering, they develop networks, relationships and skills. This, in turn, helps to build a more resilient community. Effective community participation is seen as essential for successful neighbourhood renewal.

However, in practice, community participation in neighbourhood renewal programs often falls short of theoretical standards. Many research studies provide examples of where best practice has not been followed, leading to participation strategies that:

- provide information but have no genuine two-way consultation
- are inadequately funded
- do not provide enough time to be effective
- place unrealistic expectations and unfair burdens on community representatives
- are designed to 'manage' stakeholders by allowing them to have control over minor aspects of the process, while the big decisions are made elsewhere
- fail to address the reasons why people don't participate, such as poverty, stigma and lack of support.

Community participation can be used simply to add legitimacy to a policy that the government is going to pursue anyway.

Community participation: what's really going on

Who has the power?

Policy makers can view community participation as

something very like a large football field, a neutral ground where all parties can come together and talk about what they can do to help solve social problems. The state is simply one player in the team. The game itself has all the appearance of being independent of the state, but its rules are still officially, formally determined (Everingham 2001, pp. 110-11).

In this scenario, although 'community participation' is supposed to be an opportunity for members of the community, the government and other parties (such as non-government organisations or private businesses) to come together to solve problems, the government is still in control. It designs the processes that will be used and decides the topics for discussion.

In this environment, public housing tenants have very limited power. The other parties in neighbourhood renewal – government departments, private developers and major non-government organisations – are big and well-funded. They can use their greater power to control agendas and timeframes in ways that can either assist or undermine community involvement. Residents are cut even further out of the picture by the fact that they do not bring any funding to the table. Nor is it clear how meaningful tenant participation is when the main goal of a project is to reduce the number of public housing tenants living in the community.

Does everyone agree?

One of the basic assumptions of *community* involvement is that everyone in the community (and outside the community, in government, community organisations and business) agrees on what the community should be. Community participation is often about developing a 'shared vision' for the future. But what if different people have different visions?



Living in a common geographical area does not automatically make a group of people into a community. Research shows that what ‘community’ means to people is often very individual and personal, which means it is different for everybody. So how can ‘a community’ speak with a single voice?

Another basic assumption is that community involvement will empower communities. But genuine empowerment rests on actually exercising power. To date, in many urban renewal projects around Australia, residents have had very little opportunity to truly exercise power. Community members have been told they can participate in some decisions but not in others, have been given access to some information but not to information that is ‘commercial-in-confidence’ and have been asked for their opinion only to have it dismissed or ignored because it is contrary to the core goals of the project – goals that have not been set by the community.

It is true that it is difficult to reach very excluded and marginalised people when conducting a community participation program. Sometimes governments try to manage this by consulting with community organisations instead. But this raises the risk that, in speaking on behalf of disadvantaged people, organisations will drown out those people’s voices. This could be disastrous if the organisation has different views to the tenants about what should happen.

Have people been ‘consulted to death’?

A common complaint of neighbourhood renewal workers is that communities have been ‘consulted to death’. Many communities have been the subject of countless community programs that have promised much and delivered little. It is understandable that people are disillusioned, cynical and reluctant to get involved in yet more talking. But ‘consulted to death’ should not be used as an excuse to avoid further consultation. Research shows that, rather than over-consultation, what may have happened is not enough *effective* consultation – that is, the consultation was limited to a few people or was tokenistic or didn’t deliver what it promised.

How can we make it work?

Some research has found that community participation strategies lead to positive changes in a community even if no physical change has occurred. Community participation is important. However it needs to be participation that allows people to genuinely set the agenda and exercise power over what is happening to their community. It needs to recognise and respect the fact that there will be a range of views across the community about what the community is and what should happen to it. It needs to allow the time and resources required to ensure that everyone gets the opportunity to have their say. And it needs to deliver real results: residents need to see that what they have put into the process is reflected in the outcomes.

One researcher has proposed that the default assumption should be that the tenants, or residents, should have control over all matters affecting their housing and communities, apart from those over which the landlord, or the public housing authority, or the government, can justifiably claim that they *must* have charge (Allen 2000, p. 457). Such a proposal seems a long way off, but it is something to work towards.

References

Allen, T 2000, ‘Housing renewal – doesn’t it make you sick?’, *Housing Studies*, vol. 15, no. 3, pp. 443-61.

Everingham, C 2001, ‘Reconstituting community: social justice, social order and the politics of community’, *Australian Journal of Social Issues*, vol. 36, no. 2, pp. 105-22.

This information sheet is based upon the discussion paper ‘There are people living here: exploring urban renewal and public housing estates’ by Kathleen Flanagan, published by the Social Action and Research Centre at Anglicare Tasmania. The discussion paper contains much more detail on this and other issues to do with urban renewal and includes an extensive list of references. The full discussion paper can be downloaded from www.anglicare-tas.org.au.