

What is community participation?

Theorists are talking about equity and representativeness
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As there is a great deal of discussion in the political theory literature about participatory and representative democracy, any exploration of models and methods for community consultation and participation needs to address basic theoretical constructs. This is especially so when the proponent for the plan or proposed initiative is the government or one of its many agents. Representative democracy strives to eliminate conflict, while participatory democracy uses conflict as a tool for social and political thinking. How then can the growing demand for public participation be reconciled in the Australian (or any other) system of representative democracy? Public participation will legitimise the actions of elected representatives with a number of benefits for representatives. These benefits include finding out what the public wants, marketing government programs and a process to reduce conflict, all of which give representatives knowledge vital to winning future elections.

Practitioners are refining the methods they employ

This book surveys some of the more innovative enabling mechanisms in the participatory landscape that aim to foster conditions supportive of empowerment. They can be found in the more remote terrain of active, radical participation. These innovative mechanisms include citizens' juries, consensus conferences, deliberative polling and resident feedback panels; mechanisms that share a number of attributes.

One attribute these approaches often share is the random selection of participants—a reflection of growing concerns about the representativeness of participants. The process of random selection distinguishes these participatory mechanisms from more orthodox consultation approaches, such as public meetings or advisory committees, which are often hampered by their unrepresentative nature. Orthodox approaches also have a tendency to attract a disproportionate number of 'the incensed and the articulate'. The potential for using random selection procedures to counteract such problems, particularly in relation to community involvement in planning, is examined.

There is a need to explore previously unexplored terrain and to explain where these new approaches fit into the Australian discourse, as there is no reason to persist with traditional methods that serve only to increase the community's cynicism. Radically democratic methods such as those described below are likely to satisfy our needs for fairness, immersiveness, interactivity and inclusiveness in any decision making that may deeply affect our lives.

What is community?

As many social critics like Iris Marion Young point out, 'there is no universally shared concept of community' (Young, 1986). One study that asked, 'What is a community?' found that for most people it is a small 'home area', much smaller than a local authority.

'Community' can be defined by:

- Patterns of interaction among individuals;
- Perceptions of commonality or common interest; and/or
- Geography, i.e., adjoining houses, streets, neighbourhoods, or schools.

Defining a 'community' more specifically is a hazardous undertaking. Thus, 'community' should in itself be seen as a flexible, changeable component in participatory processes.

Expressions of concern about the deterioration of the 'moral community' and civic order, and the absence of caring and connectedness in modern urban communities are accompanied by a relentless emphasis on self-interest in popular media. While acknowledging the practical difficulties in nurturing participatory processes for a wide range of people from different linguistic, age and cultural groups, we believe that skilled and sensitive participatory processes *can* help to rekindle skills of community building. We can perhaps provide some sort of model of a general duty-of-care to our fellows (both human and nonhuman), thus encouraging people to play a more active role as members of the civic order.

What is community participation?

The processes we refer to and advocate in our work and publications, involve much more than simply informing the relevant publics. While in Australia the terms *consultation* and *participation* are often used interchangeably, we choose to make a distinction to highlight the partnership qualities of the work we describe. This discussion is also presented in *A Practical Guide* (1997).

There is no widespread consensus about the meaning or purpose of 'participation' in planning supportive physical environments. A comprehensive study for Hawkesbury City Council in Sydney posited that participation is generally believed to be 'real' when participants are able to determine the outcome and therefore 'bogus' when the outcome is determined elsewhere.

Therefore, the term ***community participation***, rather than *consultation* indicates **an active role for the community**, leading to significant control over decisions. North American literature almost exclusively uses the term ***citizen participation***, rather than *community consultation*. It is often contrasted with 'citizen action', which is seen as being at the opposite end of a continuum, defined as an activity *'initiated and controlled by citizens for purposes that they determine'*.

The term ***consultation*** is taken to mean **sharing of information but not necessarily of power**. In some situations, the appropriate approach will be consultation and its limitations will need to be acknowledged. However, even in those circumstances, consultation needs to be viewed within a broader framework of participation. Why should we distinguish the difference? There are two key rationales for participation:

1. **It is ethical:** In a democratic society, those whose livelihoods, environments and lives are at stake should be consulted and involved in the decisions which affect them directly; and
2. **It is pragmatic:** Support for programs and policies often depends on people's willingness to assist the process. It is also often **necessary**: 'If planners will not involve the citizens, citizens will involve themselves.'

Forces influencing community participation processes

The trends influencing public engagement are now enumerated in a wide body of research. And all signs point to the need to acknowledge that times have changed and people are demanding more of government and private enterprise, particularly with respect to planning and development. This is more than a consumer revolution: it is an assertion of citizen rights. The trends identified are the following:

- More demanding communities;
- Diminished resources with remaining sites available for development often 'surplus' to government requirements, filled with toxic waste, poorly located and complex in themselves;
- Increasing community size is a factor;
- The speed of social change;
- Social diversity in communities;
- Scepticism about the roles and ethics of professionals;
- Rising levels of education, unemployment and early retirement, producing a pool of competent, questioning citizens;
- Generalised anxiety and hostility, resulting from high interest rates, unemployment, inflation and uncertainty about the future;
- The impacts of information technology;
- Fundamental shifts in public attitudes and values that promote participation;
- The public feeling 'burned out' and over-consulted;
- Increased use of consultation resulting in less creativity and more use of 'cookie-cutter' public involvement processes;
- More pressure being generated for two-way communications to be made available electronically;
- Organisations (particularly government agencies) 'recycling' professionals from such areas as human resources, public relations and administration into community consultation roles;
- The notion of the uninformed public no longer holds validity. Today, local people from the various communities that make up society are educated and articulate, and often have insights, knowledge and perceptions unavailable to non-local decision makers; and
- Increasing numbers of special interest groups (see Sarkissian, Walsh and Cook, eds., 1994, *Casebook*).

'Good reads' about community participation

Not surprisingly, a wide expert literature has developed to address these issues. What is often ignored, in our view, is the practical dimension: how to operationalise the theory and implement its principles. We have tried to deal with this shortcoming in some of our more practical publications. Our library contains many 'good reads' we would like to share with you. We have included their references in the following.

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