

CONSULTATION AND CONSENSUS BUILDING

1.2 METHODS OF CONSULTATION AND SENSITISATION

Problem: Consultation with stakeholders should be an integral and continuing part of development plans and policies. The problem is how to develop a process that meets a range of criteria (amongst others, acceptable, transparent, inexpensive, replicable and fruitful).

Solution: Choice of approach has to balance the various costs and benefits of the different methods of consultation. And to some extent the type of enquiry may dictate the type of consultation involved.

BACKGROUND

Traditionally, consultation with stakeholders has been a largely one-way process in which government informs its electorate of its intentions. In this system, stakeholders have the opportunity to respond through the ballot box, but this is a very blunt and negative way of commenting and responding. Clearly this is a gross over-simplification (there being many mechanisms by which governments can be influenced), but by-and-large there has been no formalised process of trying to be inclusive of all shades of opinion, and particularly listening to the voices of those who have little or no representation. Neither have the traditional processes been particularly transparent and two-way.

COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT

Community involvement covers a range of methods for developing and communicating plans and policies that involve some form of partnership between the executing authorities and the community (including all relevant stakeholders) served.

At its simplest, the process is about informing the community; at its most complex, it embodies full community empowerment. Chick (2001) identifies four levels of involvement which are:

- Information
- Consultation
- Participation
- Empowerment

Information

The processes whereby the community is informed of proposals, and are given few or limited opportunities to respond, apart from organised resistance (for example, in the form of petitions). There may be good reasons for using this process (for example, in the case of very minor proposals which have no adverse impact), but in general this is the weakest form of consultation (in its generic sense) and has little merit in advancing the cause of stakeholder involvement.

Information is usually presented in an impersonal and one-way process, using leaflets, exhibitions, media releases, etc. Feedback is not an aim of the exercise, and any that is received may have little bearing on the outcome.

Consultation

Used in a non-generic way to describe the process of engagement with the community to discuss options, and to positively seek feedback. In this process, information is presented in association with public meetings held by the authorities to further explain and listen. Feedback is also sought through questionnaires (self-administered and reply-paid, as well as direct interview). Refer to Section 2.4 for more detail.

Although a bold step towards consensus building, this form of consultation does have limitations. The process relies on the community responding and taking part; there is a danger that involvement and

feedback is generated solely by a minority who have their own interests to defend. Furthermore, the main agenda is still largely determined by the authorities who are making the proposals.

To work well, there has to be some transparency in the process; the stakeholders must be assured (and must see the evidence) that their concerns are taken into account.

Participation

At this level of involvement, the community is engaged in the whole process of conceiving and developing plans and policies. This is a true partnership whereby the community works in association with the professional staff of the authority; the latter provide the technology and planning skill-base, while the former provide the local knowledge and aspirations. Ultimate control, management and administration of the outcome of this process still rests with the executing authority, but the mechanism delivers a result that is likely to be acceptable to the community, who will also take ownership. Refer to Section 2.3 for more detail.

A major challenge in stakeholder mobilisation is to identify and involve representatives of vulnerable and marginalised groups who are typically not well-represented, including the impoverished, women, elderly, physically impaired etc. The engagement of stakeholder groups in the profiling stage better informs them of the issues to be addressed and builds their consensus on key issues.

Empowerment

In this process, all powers of planning and policy development are vested in the stakeholders. It largely bypasses the existing structures of administration and planning, and can only work in an atmosphere of trust and transparency. The role of the authorities becomes one of facilitation and providing budgetary limits; all else rests with the community. In present circumstances of administrative capacity, full empowerment is probably only feasible at localised levels.

One approach that has proved effective is to bring together key stakeholders who have experience of the problem and work on a stakeholder analysis and initial conflict analysis with them in a mini-workshop style. This is followed by more participatory and inclusive analysis where other stakeholders are invited to reflect on the problems and contribute to an emerging consensus on what the relevant issues mean for different people.

METHODS

In a spirit of good governance, governments are becoming more positive in their consultative process. There is a wide range of mechanisms for achieving greater debate, and some of the main processes are listed in **Table 1**. To some extent, the choice of method will be governed by the situation: for example, workshops and seminars may be better suited to national debates, while focus groups may be better suited to local issues. Panels may be better suited to long-term and continuing consultation, while public exhibitions and presentations are apposite for 'one-off' actions.



The greater the level of participation and involvement, the more feedback is generated. Yet, there is always a concern that this feedback is not translated into action and change. There needs to be demonstrable evidence that involvement has a purpose, while at the same time avoiding the spectre of raising expectations too highly. Those consulted must have the expectation that they can achieve some concessions, even if they cannot completely change policy and programmes.

THE PROCESS

The United Nations Centre for Human Settlements (UNCHS) guide on participatory urban decision making outlines a four-stage consultation process:

- Preparatory and stakeholder mobilisation
- Issue prioritisation and stakeholder commitment
- Strategy formulation and implementation

- Follow-up and consolidation

Table 1: Main Forms of Consultation

Procedure	Advantages	Disadvantages	Costs involved	Comments
<i>Public exhibitions</i>	<i>Opportunity to give clear indication of proposal using various media. Exhibition can be moved between locations for maximum targeting.</i>	<i>Information flow is largely one-way, though feedback can be requested (e.g. book to record comments, self-administered questionnaires)</i>	<i>Inexpensive: cost of hiring the venue, and staff time setting up the exhibition.</i>	<i>Best suited to discrete issues or projects at the local level</i>
<i>Leaflets, Press releases, Media conferences</i>	<i>Can be high profile publicity if handled well.</i>	<i>Information flow is largely one-way, though press-conferences can attract some enquiry and debate.</i>	<i>Inexpensive, but requires skilled handling ('spin')</i>	
<i>Consultative documents with written feedback</i>	<i>Clear statement of purpose and reasoning should be apparent. Anyone can respond. Amenable to process on the web.</i>	<i>Little transparency in the feedback process. Relies on initiative of responders. Responses not likely to be representative of all opinion/interests.</i>	<i>Costs of publishing the documentation and administering the distribution and feedback process. Costs reduced if the process is done on web.</i>	<i>Traditional method for 'testing' reaction to government policy and new legislation. Suited to national issues and debate (to reach wide audience)</i>
<i>Public meetings with displays</i>	<i>Combines the advantages of exhibitions with more informed discussion and opportunity to comment.</i>	<i>No certainty of transparency in feedback process. Relies on those who attend to comment, and hence unrepresentative.</i>		
<i>Public enquiries</i>	<i>A legal process which can summon any witness, and present evidence from any quarter. Demands strong argument from proposers and objectors.</i>	<i>Very formalised proceedings; discouraging for those with no representation.</i>	<i>Can be a time-consuming process and very costly</i>	<i>Can be used to decide on a specific proposal (a planning enquiry), or more generally to review or look for a possible solution to an issue.</i>
<i>Lobbying (by pressure groups)</i>	<i>Arguments can be very informed.</i>	<i>Very narrow arguments from the perspective of the lobby. Not transparent in the way that the lobby achieves its aims, and hence very much open to abuse. Lobby groups likely to represent powerful groups and vested interests - no place for the 'small voice'</i>		<i>Perhaps the main way in which institutions, corporate bodies, trade associations, etc (i.e. non-individuals) can get their message across.</i>
<i>Workshops and seminars</i>	<i>Opportunity for stakeholders to make their opinion heard in a public debate.</i>	<i>Depends on stakeholders to take part. No obvious transparency in the way that feedback is handled.</i>	<i>Cost of hiring appropriate facilities for period of the workshop.</i>	<i>A mechanism often used in national debates; can be 'moved' around the nation for maximum effect.</i>

Procedure	Advantages	Disadvantages	Costs involved	Comments
				<i>Can be used in an enquiring mode - seeking opinion about issues and solutions (i.e. not necessarily presenting a fait accompli)</i>
<i>Public attitude surveys</i>	<i>Proper sampling technique should ensure that all shades of opinion are canvassed and captured</i>	<i>Can appear to be remote; while it captures public opinion, it does not necessarily capture opinion of the interests of institutions, corporate bodies, etc. No obvious mechanism for incorporating feedback into planning process.</i>	<i>A skilled exercise which should be undertaken by professionals and hence expensive.</i>	<i>Interpretation is not always clear-cut: much depends, of course, on the way questions are set and posed</i>
<i>In-depth interviews</i>	<i>An opportunity to explore the factors which support an individual's opinion.</i>	<i>Can be very time-consuming, and relies on good-will of respondents.</i>	<i>As immediately above.</i>	
<i>Focus groups</i>	<i>A participatory approach, which allows for the exploration of views centred around specific issues. A two-way process which gives clear encouragement to contribute ideas and views.</i>	<i>Ultimately the group's views are only as representative as the group itself, i.e. selection of the group is very important. Requires skilful facilitation.</i>	<i>As immediately above</i>	
<i>Referendums</i>	<i>Gives all enfranchised the opportunity to vote on an issue</i>	<i>Difficulty in framing the question in a meaningful and acceptable way. Not everyone is enfranchised, and relies on those that are to take part. The proposers tend to have natural advantage (backing of government machinery).</i>	<i>An expensive exercise involving not only the actual voting, but also the information campaign running up to the voting.</i>	<i>Perhaps suitable for a single issue of major national importance.</i>
<i>User panels and representative groups</i>	<i>Provides a platform that is stable, can be very knowledgeable (representative groups) and gives a sense of involvement.</i>	<i>Can be very narrowly focussed. Where volunteers are being used, there is a need for frequent replacement.</i>		<i>Useful way of tapping local and specialist knowledge. Good for long-term involvement in debate.</i>
<i>Participatory forums</i>	<i>Gives opportunity for participation in the process of all aspects of planning and policy development. Strong two-way process.</i>	<i>Can raise false expectations. Activists may dominate proceedings.</i>		

Source: Based on Huskinson (2001)

CONSULTATION TOOLS

Issue prioritisation and stakeholder commitment: In order to prioritise the decision making process, stakeholders need to work on building collaboration and forging consensus as well as formalising commitment on ways forward. These arrangements usually involve the forging of partnerships to:

- Further identify, review and expand upon issues agreed to be of priority concern
- Mobilise additional actors at different levels and agree a methodology to involve them through cross-sectoral working groups
- Mobilise social and political support to obtain the commitment necessary to operationalise cross-sectoral working groups.

Strategy formulation and implementation: Strategy formulation allows for conflict resolution and leads through negotiation to agreement. The process of formulating priority strategies begins with further clarification of the issues including socio-economic analysis and provides the basis on which the working group proceeds to a review and assessment of strategic options. Subsequently, the working groups develop plans of action for implementing agreed strategies which requires extensive negotiation.

Follow-up and consolidation: Stakeholder involvement significantly increases the effectiveness of implementation. As action plans are developed, agreed and steadily implemented, consultation must be maintained. A process of monitoring and evaluation (see Section 4.4) provides a mechanism for systematic information feedback which allows appropriate adjustments to be made continuously during implementation. Finally, institutionalisation involves the process of building in the consultation process into programme procedures until it becomes routine.

Collaborative decision making often takes place in the context of stakeholder workshops. Sometimes called "action-planning workshops," they are used to bring stakeholders together to design development projects. The purpose of such workshops is to begin and sustain stakeholder collaboration and foster a 'learning by doing' atmosphere. A trained facilitator guides stakeholders, who have diverse knowledge and interests, through a series of activities to build consensus. Appreciation-Influence-Control (AIC) and Objectives-Oriented Project Planning (ZOPP) are examples of such methods (World Bank, 2001).

Appreciation-Influence-Control (AIC): AIC is a workshop-based technique that encourages stakeholders to consider the social, political, and cultural factors along with technical and economic aspects that influence a given project or policy. AIC helps workshop participants identify a common purpose, encourages to recognise the range of stakeholders relevant to that purpose, and creates an enabling forum for stakeholders to pursue that purpose collaboratively. Activities focus on building appreciation through listening, influence through dialogue, and control through action.

Objectives-Oriented Project Planning (ZOPP): ZOPP is a project planning technique that brings stakeholders to workshops to set priorities and plan for implementation and monitoring. The main output of ZOPP workshops is a project planning matrix. The purpose of ZOPP is to undertake participatory, objectives-oriented planning that spans the life of project or policy work, while building stakeholder team commitment and capacity with a series of workshops.

Participation should reduce the risk of failure. But it is not a guarantee of project success. Achieving participation is not easy. In any aid activity there may be conflicting interests among recipients as well as among others involved in the project or programme. Nevertheless, stakeholder consultation ensures there is accountability and transparency for actions taken during a project and advocates the continuation of capacity building amongst key interest groups.

KEY REFERENCES

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