

CONSULTATION AND CONSENSUS BUILDING

1.3 COMMUNITY CONSENSUS BUILDING

Problem: Traditional democratic processes tend to focus on perceived wishes of the electorate, rather than actual expressed desires. Perceptions are in the 'eye of the beholder' (be he politician or planner), and tend to reflect their preconceptions and prejudices.

Solution: Giving all stakeholders an opportunity to be involved in policy and project delivery gives participants a sense of ownership and interest. It provides the opportunity to go some way (i.e. within the limits of budget) to providing what the community identifies as its needs and priorities.

BACKGROUND

A traditional approach to policy development and project planning is for policy advisors and planners (both engineers and social scientists) to apply their technical and administrative skills to problems and solutions which are largely devoid of any community context or stakeholder representation. The outcome inevitably reflects the 'narrow' thinking of the planners, and may ignore many of the wider and more relevant interests of those who must continue to 'live' with the plan (or project) after its implementation. By consulting with, and responding to, stakeholder representations a number of advantages to the worth of the solution result:

- It identifies what the community actually values, and where their priorities lie
- It gives the community a sense of ownership in what is being proposed, and hence a greater chance of strong support and desire for a successful outcome

It is also part of good governance to promote community involvement in the process, since it helps to create transparency in development planning and decision-making, as well as acting as a catalyst for greater civic responsibility and good citizenship amongst the community.



Typically, people try to rush to solutions too quickly without completing the situation-specific analysis to an appropriate quality. Carefully facilitated stakeholder and conflict analysis reveals an important intermediate step. This is to identify processes that generate a sense of ownership and common concern to formulate appropriate solutions.

Conflict management

One way of approaching the problem initially is through a blend of stakeholder analysis, conflict analysis and conflict mapping. Stakeholder and conflict analysis would, among other things:

- identify the people and groups involved
- what are their interests, and relationship to the problem (the degree to which the problem affects them), relative influence and importance to the project/problems, their needs and fears, other questions of interest
- what types of power different stakeholders exercise
- how they normally solve problems within their groups and with other stakeholder groups
- their interests and commitment to identifying solutions

- constraints and opportunities (internal and external) facing stakeholders vis-à-vis their ability to address the problem
- possibilities for identifying common ground
- identifying specific issues that also need to be addressed to achieve maximum consensus on ways forward

Following initial analysis, other outcomes typically emerge, including:

- potential impact points for next steps
- areas where critical information is absent or needs strengthening
- what process issues are important (sequencing, conflict management styles, training needs (e.g. mediation, negotiation, facilitation))
- what resources are needed (time, expertise, budget etc)
- what are the ways in which people might be prepared to engage with the problem (cultural, social, political, institutional constraints and opportunities)

It should then be possible to conduct conflict-mapping exercises and develop action plans for consensus (see **Box 1** for a case study of conflict management).

Box 1: Community managed conflict mediation in Papua New Guinea

Conflict management research was undertaken by the Centre for International Development and Training in Port Moresby, Papua New Guinea in 2000 to reduce crime, violence and poverty in low-income urban neighbourhoods. The research had four key objectives:

1. To assess the impact of community managed conflict mediation on reducing crime and violence, and restoring social and human capital
2. To evaluate the relevance of conflict management principles, tools and skills
3. To describe key characteristics of an enabling framework for effective community based conflict management
4. To identify elements of best practice for community based conflict management

Violence in Papua New Guinea is multifarious, ranging from urban street gangs in Port Moresby, to tribal fighting in the highlands, with domestic violence being a particular scourge.

The research findings highlighted that community managed mediation was found to be most effective in settling petty feuds, debt disputes, return of stolen property and neighbourhood disagreements. However, it was found to be less effective in cases of domestic violence. The research also demonstrated the importance of creating an enabling environment for conflict management incorporating training, education, parallel development projects and legitimacy.

Source: Jones and Large (2000)

INCLUSIVENESS

Any form of consensus building must be inclusive by nature. Thus all groups within the community must have the same opportunities to voice their opinion. Weaker and less-well represented groups do not always have a strong voice in public affairs. Sometimes, for cultural reasons, their voice is not publicly admitted; mechanisms need to be developed to ensure that they are identified and heard, and that equal weight is given to their views.

KEY REFERENCES

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