

Community Consultation Skills

Considerations for the planning of community consultations



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Introductory remarks

Effective community consultation is a participatory process that underpins genuine community development. It enables communities to articulate their own concerns, and identify the appropriate responses and solutions to problems that affect them. If done well, community consultation can empower community members by strengthening their personal capacities and the capacity of their communities as a whole. It can give communities power over some of the decisions that affect their lives by involving them in the design and implementation of programs and services that affect them.

Consultation is a reciprocal process



Community consultation is a reciprocal process and a genuine partnership between the community and a service provider that embodies human rights principles in a tangible way. This means that participants should come away from the process feeling like their input has been valued, they have participated meaningfully and the process has been beneficial to them.

The first step in this process involves recognising what each group brings to the relationship and together working out how to best use these resources. This recognises that participants have prior skills, knowledge, and experience about their own problems and the best solutions to address them. It requires that facilitators do not regard themselves as the ‘experts’. Community members usually know what they need, but often do not feel confident enough to express these needs or simply lack the necessary resources to actualise their solutions in a meaningful way.

Some of the qualities that individuals and communities bring to the consultation process include:

- Resilience in the face of obstacles
- Determination to succeed
- Knowledge about what is needed to succeed

- Existing cultural traditions and practices
- Previous qualifications and skills, both practical and professional
- Knowledge about their environment
- Hopes and aspirations for both themselves and their children
- The desire to work and participate in society
- Existing community structures
- Strong loyalty and social bonds to their community, extended family, and orphaned children

Service providers can offer:

- Support and friendship
- Access to a broad range of social services
- Advice and guidance during periods of change, or when facing problems
- Some assistance with funding for community meetings and projects
- Situation specific information and training
- Explanations about wider cultural and social expectations
- Legal information and advice
- Facilitation of community development projects
- Advocacy assistance so that communities have their voices heard clearly by those in power
- Respect and recognition of community capacity and capabilities

The importance of empowerment and community member participation

It is important to ensure that participants are left feeling empowered and this can be achieved through the active participation of community members throughout the consultation and program implementation process.



Empowerment is one of the most potent forms of protection, and it is one of the keys to strengthening communities. This is particularly true in situations where people have experienced torture and systematised sexual abuse. If we are not able to make effective decisions in our lives and communities, we may come to feel powerless and frustrated. However, if we can make decisions about the things that affect us such as in community life, then we come to feel as if we have some control over our life and that of our children.

Active participation assumes that service providers work ‘with’ the community, rather than ‘for’ them. Consultations should be designed to enable community members themselves to set the aims and objectives of the services and programs that they want to instate and decide what the measures of effectiveness are. Community members must be given every opportunity to plan and manage the projects that meet their needs, while all stakeholders must be invited to contribute their ideas and participate as well.

Some participants may periodically wish to step back and gather their thoughts, ideas and opinions and that is okay, but they should be gently encouraged to participate as frequently as possible. It is important to remember that some community members will never have been consulted by service providers before; they will not initially understand what the procedure requires, and what it may mean for them. Therefore, you must be prepared to take some time to build the confidence and trust of the group. These investments of time and energy made at the beginning of a project will be soundly repaid by the successful functioning of consultations, as they get underway.

As a final note, you will need to consider how you intend to foster active participation of both women and men, so that both groups feel comfortable expressing their views and do not feel threatened or marginalised by the solutions identified.

Engaging community members in consultation processes



Engaging the community is a critical foundation for a successful consultation. If people from the community do not view consultations as something beneficial for them, they will not come. If people do not participate actively, then the resulting services will likely fail.

Consideration of who to invite is important. Communities are not homogenous, and different groups have different needs. Marginalised groups, such as women, older people and youth, cannot be assumed to be spoken for by dominant voices or 'community leaders'. When consulting with these groups, it is important to keep in mind that they may feel uncomfortable expressing their views in mixed groups. Often, separate consultations with different groups within the community can work best.

You may be able to engage community members through existing relevant groups, or you may need to form a group of interested individuals. Find out about groups that already exist, such as women's groups or youth groups, before deciding if a new group is needed.

If you decide to form a new group for the purpose of the consultation and follow-up action you need to consider not only who will come to the consultation but also how you will engage people from the community in further planning, participation, development and delivery of the agreed activities or services. Holding an initial meeting to attract community members and engage them in the group is critical.

The following considerations can help you plan the initial meeting:

- Speak to as many community members as you can and invite them personally
- Choose the date and time carefully, make sure that it does not clash with other cultural events or activities that group members may wish to attend
- Create an attractive invitation to follow up the verbal invitation
- If necessary, organise transport for people
- Make sure that there is child care and that interpreters are available if needed
- Choose a good guest speaker, a video, or an interesting activity that is culturally appropriate to the group
- At the end of the first meeting, make some plan of action based on what people would like to do, collect names and addresses if the community members are willing to give them
- Make a time and place for the next meeting

Effective facilitation



As a community consultation facilitator, you will need to adapt to a range of cultural attitudes and circumstances, not to mention changing group dynamics. Sensitive and effective facilitation requires a number of skills and characteristics:

- Active listening, which means letting others express their opinions and feelings without interruption.
- A willingness to be open and honest
- An ability to delegate responsibility
- A non-judgemental demeanour
- Gender sensitivity
- Cultural and class sensitivity
- An ability to work effectively with interpreters
- Conflict resolution skills
- Skills in dealing with the expression of emotion

Conflict is likely to arise in group consultations and must be resolved by the facilitator. Conflict itself is neither negative nor positive, but dealing with conflict can be a positive experience and inevitably leads to change, often for the better. If a conflict or a difference of opinion arises within a group, it is important to talk about it openly. This way people learn respect for each other. Everyone knows where he or she stands.

In addition, due to the nature of participants' experiences and the trust built by reciprocal, participatory consultations, emotions are likely to arise as people share their traumatic stories. It is therefore essential that the facilitator feels comfortable dealing with emotion and is able to hold a safe space for the participants. Facilitators should follow-up with participants who become very upset and refer them to appropriate services where possible.

If you are not confident that you have sufficient skills and experience, you may consider attending facilitation training or working with a co-facilitator.

For more information on effective facilitation, including how to work with interpreters, please consult the accompanying booklets, “Tips for Trainers” and “Working with interpreters”.

Following up a community consultation

A key element in meaningful community consultation is providing participants with the opportunity to be involved in identifying a plan of action to address issues raised, and in the implementation and evaluation of services and programs wherever possible. The consultation is only the first step in the process of active participation. Therefore, taking the first steps in creating an action plan should be included in the consultation agenda, as one of the final sessions. It should include identifying next steps and forming working groups that give participants the opportunity to be involved in an ongoing way.

Further information

When planned carefully and run well, community consultations are an essential and empowering step in engaging communities and working together with community members to implement services and solutions that they themselves identify.

For further information about community consultation methods, facilitation skills and resources for running consultation sessions please see our website: www.crr.unsw.edu.au/education-and-training.