Dear Students of Social Work,

In the course of your studies, you will hear about community engagement and you yourself may often refer to it. It is sometimes used to refer to any activity, action or work to reach out to another group or micro-community. So it tends to have a meaning that is given by the user and draws context from the issue discussed or at hand. Some may refer to it as enabling conversation to increase participation and involvement. With the many possible meanings out there, how exactly do we start defining community engagement?

So what is community engagement?

Almost every modern government claims to have community engagement. So does any national body that works with member organisations or communities. Some from the public institutions refer to community engagement as developing and sustaining a working relationship between one or more public bodies and one or more community groups, to help them to understand and act on the needs or issues that the community experiences. The aim of doing so is to ensure that public services are of higher quality and are more relevant to the communities they serve. So in the planning of services, there is a process of getting greater engagement from the communities in the development and delivery of services.

Community engagement however is not a new organising concept. Literature, mostly in the public health arena in the past two or more decades, have surfaced research that support the notion that the social environment in which people live, as well as their lifestyles and behaviours, can influence the incidence of illness within a population (IOM, 1988)[1]. They have also shown that a population can achieve long-term health improvements when people become involved in their community and work together to effect change (Hanson, 1988-89)[2]. This is about community participation in health promotion and disease prevention efforts. We see our own local examples such as the Community for Successful Ageing at Whampoa (or ComSA@Whampoa). ComSA initiated by the Tsao Foundation, aims to promote self-care and enable community action that supports positive ageing. It also aims to develop a comprehensive network of services to provide efficient and effective health and psycho-social care in the community for older Singaporeans. The programme design takes reference from the World Health Organisation's Active Ageing, Age-Friendly Cities and Age-Friendly Primary Care Centre framework.

But what about community involvement in solving social problems? What about using community collaborations to prevent crime, rather than relying solely on a law enforcement approach? Or encouraging neighbours to befriend vulnerable adults and communities to provide surveillance of at-risk families? The Singapore Police force has certainly had a strong history in engaging the community for crime prevention with a lasting tagline or reminder that low crime does not mean no crime.

[1] Institute of Medicine. *The future of public health.* Washington (DC): National Academy Press; 1988.
[2] Hanson P. Citizen involvement in community health promotion: a role application of CDC's PATCH model. International Quarterly of Community Health Education 1988-89;9(3):177-186.

The Concept of Community

What is a community? What one person calls a community may not match another person's definition. However, those interested in working with a community must first have a clear picture of the entity they are trying to address. It is quite common to hear reference to a geographical area such as a township as a community and the cluster of blocks of flats in an area as a micro-community. Understanding the dimensions of the concept of community will enable those initiating engagement processes to better target their efforts and work with community leaders and members in developing appropriate engagement strategies.

There is also the sociological or systems perspective and a more personal, individual perspective to community. Central to the definition of a community is a sense of who is included and who is excluded from membership (IOM, 1995)[3]. A person may be a member of a community by choice, as with voluntary associations, or by virtue of their innate personal characteristics, such as age, gender, race, or ethnicity (IOM, 1995)[3]. An example is the Retired Senior Volunteers Program where seniors volunteer because they are keen to serve society through giving of their time, expertise and experience. Individuals can therefore belong to multiple communities at any one time. When initiating community engagement efforts, one must be aware of these complex associations in deciding which individuals to work with in the targeted community.

From a sociological perspective, the notion of community refers to a group of people united by at least one common characteristic. Such characteristics could include geography, shared interests, values, experiences, or traditions. To some people it's a feeling, to some people it's relationships, to some people it's a place, to some people it's an institution (CBC, 1994)[4]. And it need not be a physical place as in the case of the online community.

One useful way to describe the community and its sectors is through a technique known as mapping (Kretzmann et al. 1993)[5]. Each Social Service Office in Singapore now maps the bounds of a community by identifying primary, secondary, and potential community resources. The potential of these resources is that they can be seen as assets that can be identified, mobilised, and used to address issues of concern and bring about change.

Service mapping: What is helpful is a heatmap rather than a geographical map to bring providers to the table. The aim is to help people to have clarity about what they are doing and allowing them to weave it together into meaningful results for the community. Questions that can facilitate this include: Why are you providing the service? (And avoid saying that there is a need.) Where are there gaps on the map (or service deserts)? And why are they there? And what do the services have in common? Sometimes there may be groups and individuals working in the same area but do not take cognizance of the contributions of others as relevant or appropriate. So the aim of such heatmaps is to facilitate agreement on outcomes and to pull everyone in the same direction.

[3] Institute of Medicine, National Academy of Sciences. *Assessing the social and behavioral science base for HIV/AIDS prevention and intervention: workshop summary and background papers.* Washington (DC): National Academy Press; 1995.
[4] Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC). Ideas: community and its counterfeits [transcript]. Toronto (Canada): CBC RadioWorks; 1994 January.
[5] Kretzmann JP, McKnight JL. (Center for Urban Affairs and Policy Research, Neighborhood Innovations Network, Northwestern University) *Building communities from the inside out: a path toward finding and mobilizing a community's assets.* Chicago (IL): ACTA Publications; 1993.

Again, from the systems perspective, another way to understand and describe a community might involve exploring factors related to:

- People (socioeconomic characteristics and demographics, health status and risk profiles, cultural and ethnic characteristics);
- Location (geographic boundaries);
- Connectors (shared values, interests, motivating forces); and
- Power relationships (communication patterns, formal and informal lines of authority and influence, stake holder relationships, flow of resources).

(Adapted from VHA, 1993)[6]

Similarly, we can define a community from a broader sociological perspective by describing the social and political networks that link individuals and community organisations and leaders. Understanding the nature and boundaries of these networks is critical to planning engagement efforts. For example, tracing individuals' social ties may help us when initiating a community engagement effort to identify leaders within a community, understand community patterns, identify high risk groups within the community, and strengthen networks within the community (Minkler, 1997)[7].

An individual also has his or her own sense of community membership. The presence or absence of a sense of membership in a community may vary over time and is likely to influence participation in community activities. This variation is affected by a number of factors. Take the example of a Mayor township. Persons at one time may feel an emotional, cultural, or experiential tie to one Community Development Council; but they too may feel that they belong to more than that CDC at the same time. Someone may be registered with a constituency but spends most of the time in yet another place. Before beginning an engagement effort, it is important to understand that all these potential variations and perspectives may exist and influence the work within a given community.

Concepts of Community Engagement

There are as many definitions of community engagement as the number of people who use it. Loosely defined, community engagement is the process of working collaboratively with and through groups of people affiliated by geographic proximity, special interest, or similar situations to address issues affecting the well-being of those people. It is sometimes used to refer to one-off contact which should not be the case. Planned with some purpose, community engagement can be a powerful vehicle for bringing about social and behavioural changes that will improve the well being of the community and its members. It often involves partnerships and collaborations that help to mobilise resources and influence systems, to change relationships among partners, and to serve as catalysts for changing policies, programs, and practices. (Fawcett et al., 1995)[8].

Community engagement draws its theory of change from sociology, political science, cultural anthropology, organisational development, psychology, social work, and other disciplines. The activities or channels of engagement involve community participation, community mobilisation and constituency building to foster community identity.

[6] Voluntary Hospitals of America, Inc. (VHA). Community partnerships: taking charge of change through partnership. Irving (TX): Voluntary Hospitals of America, Inc.; 1993.
[7] Minkler M, Pies C. Ethical Issues in community organization and community participation. In: Minkler M (editor). Community organizing and community building for health (1st ed., pp. 116-133). Piscataway (NJ): Rutgers University; 1997.
[8] Fawcett SB, Paine-Andrews A, Francisco VT, Schultz JA, Richter KP, Lewis RK, Williams EL, Harris KJ, Berkley JY, Fisher JL, Lopez CM. Using empowerment theory in collaborative partnership for community health and development. American Journal of Community Psychology 1995;23(5):677-697.

Concepts concerning community participation offer one set of explanation as to why the process of community engagement might be useful in addressing the physical and interpersonal aspects of people's environments. The real value of participation comes from appreciating the fact that mobilising the entire community, rather than engaging people on an individualised basis can lead to more effective outcomes (Braithwaite et al., 1994)[9]. Simply stated, change is sometimes easier or more likely to be successful and hopefully permanent when the people it affects are involved in initiating and promoting it (Thompson et al, 1990, p. 46)[10]. In other words, an important element of community engagement is participation by the individuals, community-based organisations including voluntary welfare organisations and institutions that
will be affected by the effort or that can support the effort.

This participation is "a major method for improving the quality of the physical environment, enhancing services, preventing crime, and improving social conditions" (Chavis et al., 1990, p.56)[11]. Neighbourhood watch groups or community surveillance to help prevent crime is a good example. There is evidence that participation can lead to improvements in neighbourhood and community and stronger interpersonal relationships and social fabric. (Florin et al., 1990)[12]. The community participation literature suggests that:

- People who interact socially with neighbours are more likely to know about and join voluntary organisations.
- A sense of community may increase an individual's feeling of control over the environment, and increases participation in the community and voluntary organisations.
- Perceptions of problems in the environment can motivate individuals (and organisations) to act to improve the community. (Chavis et al., 1990)[11]

When people share a strong sense of community they are motivated and empowered to change problems they face, and are better able to mediate the negative effects over things which they have no control (Chavis et al., 1990, p. 73)[11]. Moreover, a sense of community is the glue that can hold together a community development effort (Chavis et al., 1990, p. 73-74)[11]. An example of this is the ground work at the South Central Community Family Service Centre. This concept suggests that programs that "foster membership, increase influence, meet needs, and develop a shared emotional connection among community members" (Chavis et al., 1990, p. 73)[11] can serve as catalysts for change and for engaging individuals and involving the community to be part of decisions that affect their environment and well being.

The literature also suggests that another important element of community engagement relates to empowerment - mobilising and organising individuals, grassroots and community-based organisations, and institutions, and enabling them to take action, influence, and make decisions on critical issues. One way of empowerment is to provide important tools and resources so that residents of the community can act to gain better mastery over their lives.

[9] Braithwaite RL, Bianchi C, Taylor SE. Ethnographic approach to community organization and health empowerment. Health Education Quarterly 1994;21(3):407-416.

[10] Thompson B, Kinne S. Social change theory: applications to community health. In: Bracht N, (editor). Health promotion at the community level. Newbury Park (CA): Sage Publications; 1990.

[11] Chavis DM, Wandersman A. Sense of community in the urban environment: a catalyst for participation and community development. American Journal of Community Psychology 1990;18(1):55-81.

[12] Florin P, Wandersman A. An introduction to citizen participation, voluntary organizations, and community development: insights for empowerment through research. *American Journal of Community Psychology* 1990;18(1):41-55.

The community organisation approach also shows findings that individuals and communities: (i) must feel or see a need to change or learn, and (ii) are more likely to change attitudes and practices when they are involved in group learning and decision-making (Minkler, 1990)[13]. An important element of community organising is helping communities look at root causes of problems while at the same time selecting issues that are simple and specific and easier to address to unite members of the group, involve them in finding a solution, and helping to build the community or organisation (Minkler, 1990)[13].

Community organising can be an empowering process for individuals, organisations, and communities. At the individual level, community organising activities provide individuals with the chance to feel an increased sense of control and self confidence and to improve their coping capacities (Minkler, 1990)[13]. These have physical health benefits. Organising activities also strengthens the capacity of communities to respond to collective problems. An example is organising residents of a block of flats to address an infestation of bed bug problem. Individuals, organisations, and communities can be empowered by having information about problems and having "an open process of accumulating and evaluating evidence and information" (Rich et al., 1995, p. 669)[14].

There are often activities that can trigger the community engagement process. Some of these are tied to program or legislative mandates, while others involve special initiatives, such as those of public health services, grant makers, or existing community groups. Once triggered, the community engagement process itself can take many forms. It can range from cooperation, where relationships are informal and where there is not necessarily a commonly-defined structure, to collaboration, or partnerships where previously separated groups are brought together with full commitment to a common mission (Mattessich et al., 1992)[15]. Some of the Social Service Offices will be pivotal in taking on the coordination and initiating role as they bring about deeper discussions through their convening of platforms among service providers and community organisations.

Outcomes of community engagement

So how do we ensure that community engagement successfully meets its aims? These are possibilities.

- People participate when they feel a sense of community; for example, when they see their involvement and the issues as relevant and worth their time, and view the process and organisational climate of participation as open and supportive of their right to have a voice in the process.
- People gain a sense of empowerment; for example when they have the ability to take action, influence, and make decisions on critical issues - when engagement efforts are purposeful and targeted.

[13] Minkler M. Improving health through community organization. In: Glanz K, Lewis FM, Rimer BK, (editors). Health behavior and health education: theory, research and practice. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers; 1990.
[14] Rich RC, Edlestein M, Hallman WK, Wandersman AH. Citizen participation and empowerment: the case of local environmental hazards. American Journal of Community Psychology 1995;23(5):657-676.
[15] Mattessich PW, Monsey BR. Collaboration: what makes it work; a review of research literature on factors influencing successful collaboration. St. Paul (MN): Amherst H. Wilder Foundation; 1992.

- Community mobilisation and self-determination frequently need nurturing. Before individuals and organisations can gain control and influence and become players and partners in addressing social issues, they may need additional knowledge, skills, and resources.
- As participation involves time and effort, it is influenced by whether community members believe that the benefits of participation outweigh the costs. Community leaders can use their understanding of perceived costs to develop appropriate incentives for participation.

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8th June 2015

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