

Dear Social Service Practitioners,

Participation is a common word in many initiatives at the ground. But what exactly do we mean when we say we want to build collaborations, form partnerships or build a sense of ownership through participation? In some instances, participation is synonymous with engagement.

It is useful to be clear about who should participate and when they should do so; in what and for what outcomes, in order to allow meaningful contact and work to be done. It is also useful to decide the level of stakeholder involvement during different stages of a project or program.



Designing Deeper Levels of Participation

'Stakeholder participation' is a common theme today. Thinking about the participation of stakeholders in any process involves making choices. It can involve anyone with an interest (even a marginal one) in a project: from co-designers of a project to those with experience in performing an intervention. Involving all stakeholders equally intensely is almost never feasible or useful. If we can we should avoid saying 'We will involve all stakeholders.' We should instead be more precise about who matters more and in what ways. Sometimes a general invitation to step forward to be involved and participate in solving problems may not be appropriate if there is no plan to organise the responses. It risks having too many cooks without anyone taking ownership of following up. It can also generate uncertainty and discourage those who give their feedback and views. It is therefore more constructive to spend time to carefully analyse who can and should be invited to contribute so that there is some structure for engagement.

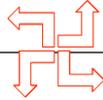
So what should we consider to bring about deeper levels of participation in projects? Participation at a very basic level, is about enabling people to give their views about issues and concerns. Those who participate often have an expectation that decision makers listen and take relevant action in culturally appropriate ways. Often, they expect decision makers to be transparent and close the loop with them even if what they hear goes against what they hope for. Unless decision makers are prepared to engage in this manner, it may not be productive to provide platforms for views.

Cultural competence



What is also less openly discussed is the aspect of cultural sensitivity and competence. This is especially pertinent in a multi-ethnic, multi-cultural country with a growing range of cultures and views. Cultural competence, which underpins the use of spaces and mechanisms to enable sharing and co-existence, is a core skill for designing participation and involvement. There is training available for cultural competency and such training can help achieve designs for participation in an environment that has increasingly diverse views and perspectives.

Appropriate type of feedback flow



Feedback is yet another word that is closely linked to participation. In designing any engagement, it is necessary that practitioners map out the different types of user feedback and how they might be useful to the project. Feedback that is two-way is often more useful as it enables discussion and clarification between users and decision makers. Planning what feedback is to be collected and how they will be used will allow the appropriate types of feedback flow to be organized. This will reduce the common frustration of users who often feel that their feedback goes into a black hole and that there is no closure of what is shared.

Information Gathering and Analysis

A common ranking exercise is the use of sticky dots to vote. This is an exercise used in the town hall type of gatherings to assess the perception of participants on issues, solutions and/or actions. While this serves as a quick way to sense energy and participation, the follow up needs to be more rigorous in terms of validating and analysing data and information before determining the final approach. For each step in the implementation of a project, we can ask the question 'who is best involved and how'.

Translating and Communicating



While participation is a common desire, there needs to be efforts to bring evaluation and research findings to users and providers in a more accessible way. We often hear about the need to do research and conduct evaluation. However, it is rare that we see the intentional application of existing research or what is already known. This is important and this is what knowledge translation is about. It describes an active, multi-directional flow of information which begins right at the start of any project. It is necessary to consider how knowledge will be translated and applied to extend its use. Findings that do not translate into learning have limited use. It is good to communicate the learning to policy makers, managers, health and social care providers, health and social care users and community leaders.

Knowledge translation, when it is part of a project, consciously builds on communicating research and findings to close the gap between evidence and practice. What is required today is focused and dedicated investment of time to seek out what is already known, translate it into application in practice or in practical ways to services and programs. We can then evaluate the outcome from such conscious efforts.

What to evaluate

To evaluate, we should be clear about what needs to be evaluated and how it is supposed to work. The purpose of the evaluation needs to be clear. It should formulate useful evaluation questions and criteria or standards to judge the performance. It also involves determining who will be the "judge" of the performance.

A major challenge in evaluation is in understanding the causes and what contributed to the results. It is also necessary to decide what to do with contradictory information and who will help to identify possible explanations for the outcomes. It is useful to have a participatory way of synthesizing the data and information and deciding recommendations or lessons learned and how these will be communicated to partners.

To finish well, findings need to be communicated to those who need them most or can use them for further causes. They should be communicated in ways that are user and audience appropriate and this may mean supporting users to make use of the findings.



Designing participation

The aim of participation is to allow contribution, input, sharing and involvement. As this involves the investment of time, effort and resources, there is usually an expectation about what happens after participation. Designing public participation processes requires us to analyze the context closely, to be clear about the purpose of the participation effort, and to iteratively design and redesign the process accordingly. Setting appropriate rules and structures to guide the participation process, including engaging diversity in culture, socio-economic background and experiences, are critical to creating a meaningful experience.

Attention should also be given to managing power dynamics. This includes the effective management of power differences which can help less powerful participants trust the process and other stakeholders more. Conversely, some powerful stakeholders might become more wary of the process if they feel that their standing and power are being diminished.

Trusting relationships are necessary as means and ends of managing diversity, conflict, and power dynamics successfully. Trust is both a lubricant and a glue. It can help facilitate the work of participation and help hold the efforts together. Designing good participation processes therefore requires us to deal with how we will approach issues in terms of context, purpose, participant involvement, leadership, process management and evaluation.