

# Public Participation in Regional Economic Development

*“I know of no safe depository of the ultimate powers of society but the people themselves; and if we think them not enlightened enough to exercise their control with a wholesome discretion, the remedy is not to take it from them, but to inform their discretion.”*

Thomas Jefferson, 1820

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Decision-makers are working toward a consensus that public participation is the most effective tool for regional economic development. The lack of government resources, uncoordinated community development activities, and the failure of more centralized approaches to solving rural problems have led to support for improved partnerships based on widespread public input. However, low turnouts for public consultation sessions and unfulfilled expectations of involvement in the development of strategic plans for the economic zones have caused disappointment. We will continue to see low levels of participation until we recognize that involvement is the result of empowerment and is conditional upon people's feeling effective and valued.

In inviting citizens to become involved, we should first consider the reasons for their participation and the expected outcomes. We might start by asking if this participation is designed simply to obtain public support for decided upon development initiatives (is it merely an element of or a contribution to development?) or if both the “animators” (experts in developing organizational and operational processes - see later section) and the citizens perceive this participation as empowering rural people. In answering these questions, we should determine how to design organizational structures to facilitate involvement and decide upon the degree of credibility to give to local processes and expertise.

## Participation as a Contribution to Development

By using involvement as an element of development, we seek to ensure the success of and buy-in to programs. Citizens support programs depending on their contribution to wealth generation and employment opportunities or some other type of rewards. We expect people to participate because the decisions affect them and implementation depends on them, but we are reluctant to pass on control, direction, or decision-making.

Decision-makers from outside the community design and control programs. There is often the perception that local people do not have the technical and process skills necessary to ensure success. The plans and processes may often be expressed in technical terms, creating difficulty for the community and placing much of the control in the hands of professionals. Unfortunately, local people very quickly realize that programs are not theirs. Technical aspects of planning become prominent, and we exclude the language and processes that are most common to life in the community. People are invited to participate because of the usefulness of their ideas, allowing for the perception that decision-makers may “cherry pick” development strategies in search of successful ventures without community involvement. The result is the continuation of low levels of public participation due to a lack of meaningful control and input.

Outside forces set up organizations, which they see as the solutions to the community’s problems, to implement programs. Again, the results that the “animator” or development worker is trying to obtain do not materialize because the community does not own and control the structures. Indeed, we should be helping to develop organizations that are a reflection of the community’s make-up instead of structures that conform to preconceived ideas. Development workers often design structures that, in the end, reflect only part of the community. We need to ask if such organizations are capable of locally-led development when there is limited empathy with those who should be best served. We expect high levels of public input from a community that may not even see itself represented in these organizations. If community economic development is to be successful, we must find ways of developing structures that are designed by, accountable to, and representative of all elements of the community.

## Participation as Empowerment

Lily Walker, an Australian aboriginal leader, once said, “If you come to help me, then you are wasting my time. But if you come here because your liberation is bound up in mine, then let us begin.”

This statement provides excellent insight into what the expectations of citizens might be. The following principles should guide public participation in development initiatives:

1. *People are the primary ingredients of development.* Development should be based on people’s needs, result from their analysis of the community and its future, and stem from local decisions. People, regardless of their poverty or oppression, can themselves progressively transform their environment with the help of external resources. People are, therefore, the subjects, not the objects, of their own development efforts. Development depends on working with people rather than providing externally conceived solutions to local problems and issues.
2. *We must recognize people’s knowledge.* Local knowledge is just as valuable as the expertise of professionals. The role of each must be acknowledged both in the design and planning and in the implementation and evaluation phases of development. This often requires a change in mentality and attitude by the community and the professional. External forces should neither be the sole source of knowledge nor the benchmark for determining what is valid or useful knowledge. The community must make these decisions.
3. *“People” includes youth, women, and other minorities.* Unfortunately, young people have been ignored as having too little to contribute. Women, who have led their communities as entrepreneurs, must be considered equal partners in development. We should take the concerns of all social and cultural groups into account and not dismiss these groups as being “self-interested.” When groups or individuals are not part of the decision-making process, their agendas are usually reinterpreted or ignored, adding to a feeling of alienation.

Meaningful participation must be a tool assisting people to feel empowered to control their own destinies. This depends extensively on the development of people's skills and abilities, allowing them to manage their own initiatives. People must have the confidence to negotiate with existing development and delivery systems and to take the action they believe is essential to their development. Development workers must help fill any gaps that may exist between people's knowledge and skills and the technical approaches and processes used by community planners and facilitators.

Community processes that emerge as a fundamental dynamic of development are much more a part of the community's life. The organizations that emerge recognize the role of education and training in preparing the local people to take ownership. The emphasis is on less technical processes, ensuring that the technicians are a resource to the people rather than to the product. The organizations use personal control and growth, self-reliance, and conformity to local values as the motivators. The emphasis is on the people, and the programs are the products of collective decision-making. The belief must be that people are the agents of their own fate. Organizations take people's values, ideals, and expectations and help integrate the programs with these realities.

## **The Development “Animator”**

The major role of the “animator” or development worker becomes one of helping people develop a community vision and ensuring that both the organizations and development initiatives consistently target that vision. He/she uses environmental scanning to anticipate problems and facilitate progress. Because of the contribution of the “animator,” the community's volunteers feel confident that they are making progress on their own terms. The “animator” must, however, earn the trust of the community if his/her input is to be acknowledged and valued.

## **Obstacles to Public Participation**

The practice of participation is a recent approach to development. There is a need for further study and refinement if it is to be effective. This lack of successful public participation models as guides creates problems for both Government and the community.

### **Power-Sharing**

Governments traditionally developed and delivered programs with little involvement of the community. The only consultation was with local leaders who, in many cases, were considered the “elites” and were not truly representative of the community point of view. This limited community input resulted in a lack of local buy-in and support. The decision-making power remained with Government. The community, while expected to be involved, had limited influence.

The community believed that since it was representative of the people and its organizations were autonomous, it should have more control over the design and priorities for development. The community relied heavily on the assumption that it knew best and should direct the resources required to solve local problems.

The decision of Government to decentralize programs to the community, as outlined in *Change and Challenge*, brought both of these philosophies into conflict. Citizens now ask if the community will take responsibility for program design and delivery and be given authority for decision-making or if it will assume responsibility for programs without authority and resources. Before public participation efforts can be successful, there must be a corresponding shift in power. That will take more time and discussion.

### **Administration**

Governments are held accountable for the expenditure of public funds and, therefore, find difficulty in delegating to the community. These funds are the determining factor in both program development and priority setting. Centralized administrations tend to reserve the right to determine these priorities. Government planners and administrators are a professional group that sees great difficulty in conceding its practice to local volunteers. Furthermore, the time required to involve the community through information, training, and negotiation is seen as adding cost to programs as well as prolonging time frames. Therefore, there is little support for or commitment to engaging in shared decision-making.

### **Benefits of Public Participation**

Governments recognize that a centralized approach to development has not been successful in the past and that there is a need for a different strategy. While public participation in development issues does not guarantee success, decision-makers realize that the community must be more involved. There must be a sharing of information about local needs and priorities. The value of local knowledge and skills in development presents further argument for engaging the public in decisions. Without this involvement, the “influentials” both from within and outside the community will continue to prescribe solutions for those who lack such impact. When people become knowledgeable of development issues, which may initially require additional time, their support and assistance will quickly make up for lost time.

Other benefits of participation include the following:

1. More reliable feedback is available on the impacts of development initiatives as a result of the involvement of those who are most affected.
2. Local knowledge and expertise can provide insights leading to an adaptation of programs to meet local needs and aspirations.
3. Dealing with local organizations and institutions may cost less than dealing with centralized administrations.
4. The identification, acknowledgment, and recognition of local technical information may add to better design and management of programs.
5. Local partnerships may add to improved utilization and maintenance of government facilities and resources.
6. Community confidence as a result of involvement can result in cooperation in new program innovation.

### **Implications for Regional Economic Development Boards (REDBs)**

The new approach to regional economic development addresses many of the obstacles and builds on the strengths identified above. Public participation, as advocated in the Task Force report, is aimed at combining the roles of Government and the community in defining the best possible structures for development. The structures that emerged were locally designed, encouraged accountability, and were easily put in place. The introduction of Performance Contracts as a method of doing business was an attempt at recognizing the legitimate role, responsibility, and accountability of the community, its stakeholders, and Government. However, these contracts will be a reflection of the objectives of all stakeholders only if the community has the confidence to present and negotiate solutions.

Public participation still has many obstacles to overcome before it is accepted as a legitimate approach to development. There is a need for better education about the roles of Government and the community, more understanding of the contribution of each player, and, finally, a more equitable sharing of roles, responsibilities, and authority. While each has a legitimate role in development, misunderstandings and conflict will continue to exist if concerted efforts at resolving differences are not taken seriously.

## **Methods of Public Participation**

### **Public Meetings**

A public meeting is the least effective way to obtain focussed input. Meetings may fail because of the unwillingness of people to attend, the variety of interests that people bring to the meeting, and the nature of their input, which is quite general.

### **Newsletters**

While this one-way communications method is effective for circulating information, it is not useful for obtaining input for development decisions and directions.

### **Focus Groups**

Focus groups are effective for obtaining input and direction on a specific topic. They allow for targeting participants and focussing discussion. This is a good method for gathering input for sector strategies contained in strategic plans.

### **Questionnaires**

Questionnaires are recommended for collecting information but are limited in that there is little or no interaction between the parties. Usually, low input rates to surveys create doubt about the validity of the information collected. Furthermore, most people see the originators of questionnaires as simply seeking opinions without intending to resolve the problems identified.

### **Media**

Probably the most powerful public participation tool is the media. Newspapers, television (especially community cable channels), and radio can become forums for public discussion and debate and serve as vehicles for community education, especially relating to specific topics of general community interest.

There are many other methods of involving the public, and we can adapt many of these to address specific needs. School appearances and speaking engagements at other community and regional functions are useful examples. It is essential to use more than one method to encourage effective public involvement.

## **Bibliography**

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