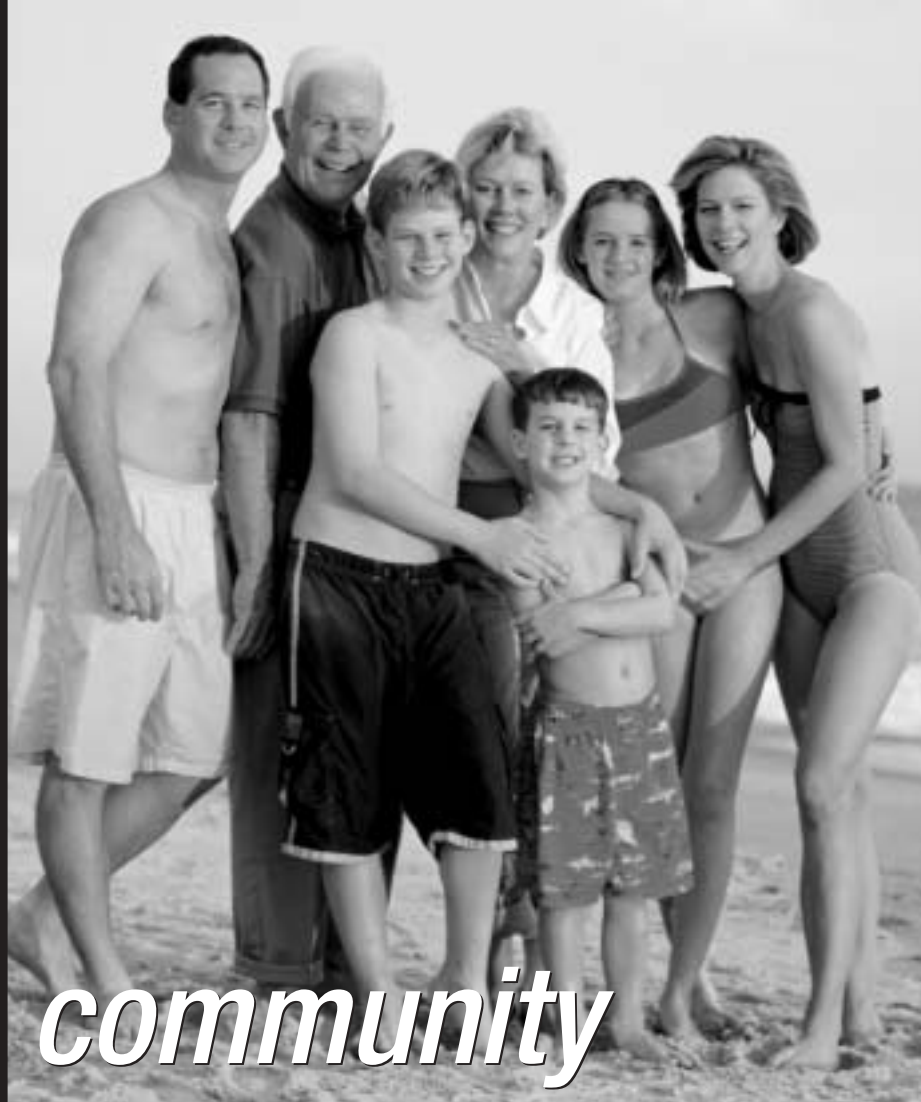


Community participation and involvement, a key element of action research, is likely to ensure community “ownership” of a project, suit local circumstances, and increase a project’s sustainability. However, developing and maintaining the participation of stakeholders can often be a challenge. **RICHARD MUNT** outlines some of the strategies and considerations.



Building *community*

participation

Community participation and involvement in a project is one of the key elements of action research. By proactively and systematically working towards improving the levels of involvement in the various stages of a project, the outcomes are more likely to suit local circumstances, ensure community “ownership”, and increase the sustainability of a project. However, developing and maintaining the participation of stakeholders can often be a challenge requiring various strategies and considerations.

Participation can encompass many activities. It can be the involvement of stakeholders in the initial planning stages of a project, the development of action plans, or being a member of working groups, reference groups and focus groups. It could mean receiving project up-dates in the form of a newsletter, or providing reflections or feedback about the implementation of a project strategy from a project recipient’s point of view.

Identifying participants

Apart from working out how a particular project plans to achieve its goals, identifying who is going to be involved, and what that involvement may be, can form a strong basis for identifying and including all of the stakeholders.

In the early stages of planning a project some important questions can act as a guide.

- Who are the people who will be affected by the project?
- What is the nature of their current involvement with the project?
- Are these people supportive?
- In what capacity can they be involved?
- What is the best way to open up a dialogue?

- What processes need to be established to include people?

This questioning process can help to build up a list of stakeholders, which can be diagrammatically represented by a set of concentric circles based upon level of involvement (Figure 1). Usually at the centre of the diagram is the project team and those “who it is for” (Wadsworth 1997). The next level out could be the project partners. Often these are organisations or networks who are involved through some form of agreement, coalition or contractual arrangement with the project team and recipients. This could include government agencies, funding bodies and support agencies.

Outside this circle are the networks, organisations, service providers and community members with an interest in the project, who can contribute



in some form but are not necessarily directly involved with the decision making processes. Finally, there is the community or neighbourhood.

The challenge for achieving good participation in the project is to involve all these groups in a strategic way with the various stages of implementation.

The inclusion of all those who could potentially be involved with the project in the early stages can have a number of advantages:

- collective ideas, perceptions and resources can be pooled;
- a dialogue can be initiated and communication systems that keep everyone in the loop can be developed;
- issues and ideas can be explored from a number of different perspectives;
- creating an environment of collective responsibility can create a commitment to work together in a productive way;
- participation can help to build a sense of ownership of a project, which is an important ingredient for building a commitment to change;
- the development of “shared visions” can improve the sustainability of a project; and
- community involvement ensures an approach that suits local circumstances.

As a project progresses it is often a useful exercise to pose the question at a project team meeting: “Who else can we involve and how can we create opportunities for others to participate?”

Adding to and developing the stakeholder map, and revisiting the question of who can be involved along the way, will assist in developing a diverse stakeholder base that can be reflected in a project reference and working group that effectively represents community interests.

Recruiting and maintaining involvement

Once people are involved in a project in some way, maintaining ongoing commitment can become the next challenge. Action research can be a very useful way of dealing with problems such as this. By working through strategies and evaluating their effectiveness in terms of building and maintaining participation on an ongoing basis, a project team can come up with solutions that work best in the local situation.

For example, one of the first project strategies could be to inform the community about what the project hopes to achieve. The initiating question could be: “What would we need to do to inform the community about this project?”

This would lead a project team to develop strategies for the inclusion of participants in a systematic way where different stakeholders could have input. Typical promotion ideas that would aid recruitment could include: press releases, newsletters, advertising, giving presentations to other community based groups, service clubs and networks, holding a project launch, producing flyers and posters, conducting media interviews, and creating a display or exhibition.

During this project promotion stage a sample of people in the community could be asked via an informal interview, or a questionnaire, if the message was getting through to them about the project and how they found out about it. The learnings from such a strategy can provide valuable information about how to reach the community in the future or whether the project team needs to go back to the drawing board to reconsider the question.

Using action research cycles, stakeholder involvement can be built into

the various planned strategies throughout the life of the project. Action plans can be developed to assist with the identification of those who will be affected by the project's actions and how these people might participate in the project.

Participants' roles can include:

- being part of a critical reference group;
- participating in a forum;
- participating in the observation of strategy implementations;
- being part of a working group;
- providing feedback to the project through focus groups, surveys and questionnaires; and
- becoming a project volunteer.

Participation in meetings

Becoming involved in a project can often be a difficult and confronting experience for community members, particularly when they become part of a more formalised project group. The format of the meetings, venue, language (especially the over use of acronyms), and processes can act as barriers to involvement.

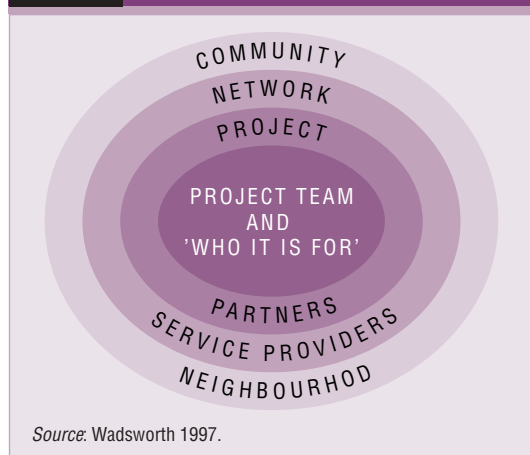
Initially it may be useful to develop a community member induction process, arrange a “meet and greet” between those involved and then create a user-friendly environment for get-togethers.

Some of the considerations for meeting are:

- What time can people contribute?
- What is the best time for them to attend a meeting?
- Do they have transport?
- Is child care required?
- Are there disabilities that need to be catered for?
- Is the meeting environment appropriate and comfortable?
- Does the venue have the necessary facilities?
- Are there language barriers?

The traditional meeting format can also be a barrier for active participation. Many projects have found that it is useful to plan a meeting around

Figure 1 A model of involved stakeholders in a community project



Source: Wadsworth 1997.



a meal, or at a neutral venue that is away from an office environment. This can promote the often-valuable informal communication where working relationships can be built. It may also be necessary to move the venues around if the project is taking place over a wide geographic area. This also gives people a sense that the project is coming to them and that it is on their patch. The meeting could agree to rotate the chair to include everyone at some stage. The format can be varied to include brainstorming sessions, small group reflective sessions, and an array of other techniques that facilitate interactive communication.

Communication

The dissemination of project-related information on an ongoing basis is another key strategy for involving people and maintaining interest. Some of the most useful information sharing techniques include:

- email trees;
- newsletters;
- press releases;
- project update presentations;
- web pages;
- email chat rooms;
- distributed minutes of meetings;
- photo journals; and
- teleconferences.

When projects have reached a milestone or have completed a significant achievement, participation can be acknowledged and valued by holding some form of celebration. This may be as simple as a BBQ. Bulletins and newsletters that have contributions from a cross section of stakeholders and that include photographs and “interest” stories also help to include people and give them a sense of belonging to the project.

The importance of local knowledge

Many of these techniques, strategies and principles apply equally well in those communities where there is a diverse cultural cross-section, or in localities with a particular ethnic or indigenous population. However, local knowledge about how to engage the community is essential, and this means ensuring that local groups are well represented on the project team and reference groups.

In those areas where extended family networks predominate, it is important to include individuals who can act as cultural guides. These people need to be known by the community and have a good grasp of cultural complexities, mores and protocols. This knowledge may significantly guide ways of communicating, making decisions, congregating, engaging, and setting timelines.

Resourcing

Being able to plan for quality participation will involve resources and, ideally, there should be a budget specifically to meet these expenses. Strong participation has a high cost-benefit ratio and putting aside funds to productively include the stakeholders can incur ongoing expenses. Budget line items can include: venue hire, refreshments, facilitators, travel, interpreters, hearing loops, communication costs, printing and stationery, and child care.

Finally, it is the people involved in a project who are the project’s most useful and valuable resource. If a sense of collaborative effort can be developed, not only will the project gain strength and momentum but it will also empower the participants, and this is the most compelling element for change.

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Further reading

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