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Community participation and empowerment: putting theory into practice

David Wilcox

• Introduction

This article provides a summary of a new *Guide to Effective Participation*¹, which offers a comprehensive framework for thinking about involvement, empowerment and partnership. It also provides an A to Z of key issues and practical techniques for effective participation.

• Ten key ideas about participation

The Guide to Effective Participation identifies 10 key ideas which aid thinking about community involvement.

1. Level of participation

The guide proposes a five-rung ladder of participation which relates to the stance an organisation promoting participation may take.

- *Information*: merely telling people what is planned.
- *Consultation*: offering some options, listening to feedback, but not allowing new ideas.
- *Deciding together*: encouraging additional options and ideas, and providing opportunities for joint decision making.

- *Acting together*: not only do different interests decide together on what is best, they form a partnership to carry it out.
- *Supporting independent community interests*: local groups or organisations are offered funds, advice or other support to develop their own agendas within guidelines.



Practitioners consulted during development of the guide felt strongly that information-giving and consultation are often wrongly presented as participation. This can lead to disillusionment among community interests, or pressure for more involvement with the potential for conflict and delay.

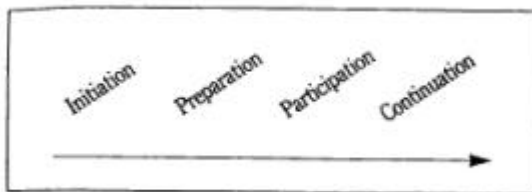
The guide suggests it is more productive for all concerned if organisations promoting involvement are clear in their initial stance - even if the degree of participation offered is limited. One stance, or level, is not necessarily better than any other - it is rather a matter of 'horses for courses'. Different levels are appropriate at different times to meet the expectations of different interests. However,

¹ The guide was supported by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation and written by David Wilcox, working with an editorial group of Ann Holmes, Joan Kean, Charles Ritchie and Jerry Smith. Their work initially drew on participation and empowerment studies funded by the Foundation. Further development of the guide involved seminars with experienced practitioners and wide circulation of drafts. Copies of the guide are available from the above address. Price £9.95 inc. p&p.

organisations promoting involvement should be prepared to negotiate greater degrees of participation if that will achieve common goals.

2. Initiation and process

The guide deals with situations where someone, or some organisation, seeks to involve others at some level: that is, participation doesn't just happen, it is initiated. Someone (here termed a practitioner) then manages a process over time, and allows others involved more or less control over what happens. In the guide the process is described during four phases: Initiation - Preparation - Participation - Continuation.



Many problems in participation processes develop because of inadequate preparation within the promoting organisation - with the result that when community interest is engaged the organisation cannot deliver on its promises.

3. Control

The initiator is in a strong position to decide how much or how little control to allow to others - for example, just information, or a major say in what is to happen. This decision is equivalent to taking a stand on the ladder - or adopting a stance about the level of participation.

4. Power and purpose

Understanding participation involves understanding power: the ability of the different interests to achieve what they want. Power will depend on who has information and money. It will also depend on people's confidence and skills. Many organisations are unwilling to allow people to participate because they fear loss of control: they believe there is only so much power to go around, and giving some to others means losing their own.

However, there are many situations when working together allows everyone to achieve

more than they could on their own. These represent the benefits of participation. The guide emphasises the difference between Power to... and Power over.... People are empowered when they have the power to achieve what they want - their purpose.

5. Role of the practitioner

The guide is written mainly for people who are planning or managing participation processes - here termed practitioners. Because these practitioners control much of what happens it is important they constantly think about the part they are playing. It may be difficult for a practitioner both to control access to funds and other resources and to play a neutral role in facilitating a participation process.

6. Stakeholders and community

The term community often masks a complex range of interests, many of whom will have different priorities. Some may wish to be closely involved in an initiative, others less so. The guide suggests it is more useful to think of stakeholders - that is, anyone who has a stake in what happens. It does not follow that everyone affected has an equal say; the idea of the ladder is to prompt thinking about who has most influence.

7. Partnership

Partnership, like community, is a much abused term. It is useful when a number of different interests willingly come together formally or informally to achieve some common purpose. The partners don't have to be equal in skills, funds or even confidence, but they do have to trust each other and share some commitment. This takes time.

8. Commitment

Commitment is the other side of apathy: people are committed when they want to achieve something, apathetic when they don't. People care about what they are interested in, and become committed when they feel they can achieve something. If people are apathetic about proposals, it may simply be that they don't share the interests or concerns of those putting forward the plans.

9. Ownership of ideas

People are most likely to be committed to carry something through if they have a stake in the idea. One of the biggest barriers to action is 'not invented here'. The antidote is to allow people to say 'we thought of that'. In practice that means running brainstorming workshops, helping people think through the practicality of ideas, and negotiating with others a result which is acceptable to as many people as possible.

10. Confidence and capacity

Ideas and wish lists are little use if they cannot be put into practice. The ability to do that depends as much on people's confidence and skills as it does on money. Many participation processes involve breaking new ground - tackling difficult projects and setting up new forms of organisations. It is unrealistic to expect individuals or small groups suddenly to develop the capability to make complex decisions and become involved in major projects. They need training - or better still the opportunity to learn formally and informally, to develop confidence and trust in each other.

• Turning theory into practice

The guide takes these key ideas and deals with the practical implications by challenging the following 'quick fixes' which may be proposed as ways to tackle participation problems:

- *"What we need is a public meeting"*. Meeting the public is essential, but the conventional set-up with a fixed agenda, platform and rows of chairs is a stage set for conflict. Among the problems are:
 - The audience will contain many different interests, with different levels of understanding and sympathy;
 - It is very difficult to keep to a fixed agenda - people may bring up any issue they choose and organisers look authoritarian if they try to shut people up; and,
 - Few people get a chance to have a say.

As an alternative:

- Identify and meet key interests informally.
- Run workshop sessions for different interest groups.
- Bring people together after the workshop sessions in a report-back seminar.
- *"A good leaflet, video and exhibition will get the message across"*. These may well be useful tools, but it is easy to be beguiled by the products and forget what is the purpose of using them.

In developing materials consider:

- What level of participation is appropriate? If it is anything more than information-giving, then feedback and other people's ideas and commitment are being sought. High-cost presentations suggest minds are already made up;
- What response is sought - and can the organisation handle it?; and,
- Could more be achieved with lower-cost materials and face-to-face contact?
- *"Commission a survey"*. Questionnaire studies and in-depth discussion groups can be excellent ways to start a participation process, but are seldom enough on their own.

Bear in mind:

- Surveys require expert design and piloting to be useful;
- They are only as good as the brief provided; and,
- In planning a survey, design it as part of a process which will lead through to some action.
- *"Appoint a liaison officer"*. That may be a useful step, but not if everyone else thinks it is the end of their involvement in the process.

Avoid simply passing the buck, and aim to empower the liaison officer. Consider:

- Do they have the necessary skills and resources for the job?;
 - Will they get the backing of other colleagues?; and,
 - Are they being expected to occupy conflicting roles - that is, wear too many hats?
- *"Work through the voluntary sector"*. Voluntary bodies are a major route to communities of interest, and may have people and resources to contribute to the participation process. However, they are not 'the community'.
 - There will be many small community groups who are not part of the more formalised voluntary sector; and,
 - Voluntary groups, like any organisations, will have their own agendas funding targets to achieve, issues to pursue. They are not neutral.

Treat voluntary organisations as another sectoral interest in the community albeit a particularly important one:

- Check out organisations with a number of different sources; and,
 - Having said all that, voluntary organisations will have a wealth of experience and are essential allies. They've been through many of the problems of involving people before.
- *"Set up a consultative committee"*. Some focus for decision-making will be necessary in anything beyond simple consultation processes. However:
 - Even if a committee is elected or drawn from key interest groups it will not be a channel for reaching most people; and,
 - People invited to join a committee may feel uncomfortable about being seen as representatives.

Consider instead:

- A group which helps plan the participation process;

- Surveys, workshops and informal meetings to identify other people who might become actively involved; and,
- A range of groups working on specific issues.

- *"There's no time to do proper consultations"*. While that may be the case if the timetable is imposed externally it should not be used as an excuse to duck difficult questions. These will return more forcefully later.

If the timetable is genuinely tight:

- Explain the timetable constraints;
 - At least produce a leaflet or send out a letter; and,
 - Run a crash programme for those interested - perhaps over a weekend.
- *"Run a Planning for Real session"*. Special 'packaged' techniques can be very powerful ways of getting people involved. However no one technique is applicable to all situations.
 - *"Bring in consultants expert in community participation"*. There's some truth in the saying that *"consultants are people who steal your watch in order to tell you the time"*. Often those employing consultants have the answer themselves, and are just trying to avoid grappling with the issue. However, consultants can be useful to assist with a participation process, but are no substitute for the direct involvement of the promoting organisation.

In using consultants:

- Give a clear brief on the purpose of the exercise, the level of control and boundaries for action;
- Encourage the consultants to ask hard questions and provide an independent perspective; and,
- Make sure the organisation promoting the exercise can deliver in response to the ideas produced, and can handle things when consultants leave.

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